Cruel Vengeance

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Cruel Vengeance

by sunmoonandstars

Summary

They were supposed to save the world.

No one realized the deadly cocktail of bitterness, anger, resentment, and vengeance that was created when this team came together: the anachronistic war hero, the master assassin, the Winter Soldier, the fallen prince, the neglected schemer, the cast-aside scientist, the experiment gone very wrong, the archer, and the genius billionaire. They were supposed to be the heroes of Earth, its last and best defense.

They were not supposed to become its conquerors.

Notes

This piece of fanfiction was inspired by the Valeks_princess work Snow and Fire (http://archiveofourown.org/works/8577655/chapters/19666444) on Archive of Our Own. Credit for many, if not all, of the plot elements goes to that writer.
I do not own any of the characters related to Marvel, the Avengers, SHIELD, or any associated plot points.
The Forgotten Prince

Asgard
Many Years Before

The princes stormed through the palace.

Well, the elder, Thor, stormed. It would be more accurate to say his twin, Loki, stalked. He was a smooth and silent shadow behind Thor’s blustering presence.

“Father!” Thor boomed.

Loki seized his brother’s vambrace urgently. “Thor, now is not-”

“Father!”

The king, Odin, turned away from his counselors with a scowl. “What is it?” he snapped. “This is a very tense time-”

“Father, we must not let this insult to Asgard stand,” Thor rapped out, gesturing effusively at nothing in particular. “The Kree have disrespected us one too many times! And on top of this latest wound, they have attacked our military outpost the day before the peace treaty was to be signed!”

Loki stepped to the side to force Thor to look at him. “Brother, listen. You have no proof that it was sanctioned by their government-”

“Enough, Loki! This peace treaty was your idea, and it has failed! You are naught but an obstruction to the throne! Father, please. Let me lead an assault on their home planet-”

“How can you expect to be a good diplomat if you can’t even be bothered to recall the name of a people’s homeworld?” Loki said, voice forceful yet deceptively polite.

Odin held up a hand. “Enough. Thor, you’ve made your position clear. Loki, your judgment?”

Loki straightened and ordered his thoughts. “There is no reason this attack should cause Asgard to break off negotiations with the Kree. It is well-known that they have many militarized tribes on the outskirts of their cities who answer to no government. There is already a clause in the peace treaty which would require the Kree oligarchy to actively challenge those groups and contain their assaults on Asgardian outposts and civilians alike. As there is no evidence whatsoever linking the attack to an official Kree military unit, it seems most prudent to sign the treaty and ensure the oligarchy knows that they will be expected to punish all future attacks. As it is, their army has been stretched too thin fighting our own to focus on the anarchic tribes, which pose a much lesser threat to the stability of the Kree society.”

“Tis ridiculous,” Thor snarled. “That we should let this go unpunished - Father! You’re not considering this proposal-”

“I am not,” Odin said, looking down his nose at Loki. No mean feat, given that Loki himself was several handswidths taller. “Loki, you make note of several salient points, yet Thor is correct. The insult is too grave.”

“For a military unit unattached to the government and unbound by the cease-fire to attack an outpost of the army that has been on Kree soil fighting them for a century and a half? Really? That’s a grave
“Their motives matter not,” Odin growled. “We cannot tolerate any attack on Asgard’s army whatsoever. Loki, I suggest you go speak with the Kree delegation. Thor, come with me, we must begin planning the invasion…”

The king led his elder son away, toward his other warriors. Among them were several high-level generals, Lady Sif, and the Warriors Three. Sif and the Warriors smirked at Loki; clearly, they’d overheard some part of the argument.

Loki didn’t let any of his fury and indignation show on his face as he gave them a cool nod and strode out of the throne room. This was ridiculous. Who had solved the baelor’s riddle and saved all their hides when Hogun dragged them into that cave in search of a treasure that didn’t exist? Who had rallied Thor’s friends when the golden prince himself fell to the poisoned barbs of the alken on Vanheim, and led the battle against it? Who had saved their lives from the bilgesnipe that Thor and Volstagg woke on a dare from Fandral by casting an illusion that enticed it off a cliff? Loki. He could match any of them in battle and was one of the most powerful seidr masters in living history, trained by Frigga herself. And he was a prince of Asgard, one of two heirs to the throne. Yet they cast him aside as if his opinion mattered no more than that of an illicit peasant raised in the far reaches of Midgard’s poles!

He registered that his icy demeanor was causing people to dodge out of his way in the hallways, and took a moment of brief and vicious pleasure from it. He was not well liked and less understood, here in Asgard’s palace, the one member of the elite warrior class who was lean and fast rather than blunt and forceful and bound in muscles. Loki almost snorted. He was in excellent shape and could run far longer, move far faster, than Thor. He much preferred his own build.

Even if it got him shunned.

He braced himself as he approached the palace wing reserved for visiting ambassadors. It was a gesture of respect for him to visit them personally rather than summoning the Kree ambassador and his retinue to Loki’s personal audience chamber. They’d take it as rudeness, mockery perhaps, that he had come here only to throw the gesture in their faces with the denial of the peace treaty. It was better than summoning the delegation and appearing as the haughty Asgardian second prince, lording his position above the simpler society he had decided not to assist.

Loki resisted a snarl. He knew exactly what would happen. Sending him off with this task ensured he would become the face for Kree hatred of Asgard. And while Loki’s list of aliases included the Liesmith and the Trickster Prince, he had no desire to add Traitor Prince to that list by revealing details of Asgardian state decisions and who had made them to the Kree.

He could. He could be honest with the Kree ambassador.

But as he nodded curtly to the guards and they opened the golden doors to the Kree’s suites, he knew he shouldn’t, and probably wouldn’t. He had a duty. To his brother, and his king.

A Kree woman was sitting in the antechamber to their suite of rooms. She leaped up when she saw him. “Your Highness!” She poured herself into a startlingly graceful curtsey. “What may I do for you this afternoon?”

“Take me to see Ambassador Yanden, please.”

“Of course. Right this way, Your Highness.”

Loki was shown to a familiar receiving chamber that he had visited often over the centuries,
sometimes as a guest, sometimes while wearing the guise of the ambassador presently occupying those rooms. He settled himself into the seat on the guest’s side of the desk and waited.

Ambassador Yanden strode in minutes later, looking perfectly sharp. Loki still detected an elevation to the man’s pulse. He’d been moving quickly.

“Good afternoon, Your Highness!”

The dark prince of Asgard sighed and pressed a finger to his temple, knowing Yanden would catch the motion and pick up on the tension.

Yanden slowed, and moved around the desk at a more stately pace. “It seems that I may have spoken too soon. Is there a problem with the treaty?”

“Of sorts,” Loki said. “In that the Allfather has decided to suspend negotiations.”

Yanden froze. Loki waited several seconds before the ambassador replied, “Your Highness, I believe I may have misheard. Asgard wishes to suspend negotiations?”

“Yes.”

“May I inquire as to why?” Despite the polite words, Yanden’s tone was icy, snappish.

Loki eyed the other man. This was unpleasant. He actually liked the Kree ambassador, which was an infrequent occurrence. The Liesmith was notorious for having few, if any, friends. “If I were the Allfather, or Prince Thor, I would say no to that question,” he said quietly. “However, out of the respect that I believe has grown between us over the years of negotiation on this treaty, I will tell you that it is the opinion of Asgard’s crown that yestereve’s attack on the Asgardian military outpost was an act of war and thus breaks the conditions of the cease-fire. Such an action on the part of the Kree oligarchy cannot be tolerated during a mutually accepted cease-fire. Therefore, Asgard will be indefinitely withdrawing from negotiations on any peace between our realms.” He chose each word carefully, hoping to the Norns that Yanden would read the subtext.

Yanden’s face grew darker with every word. When Loki finished, he spat, “That attack had nothing to do with the Kree government. We have been opposing such militant groups for decades, and have done nothing because our armies are occupied fighting Asgard. Tell the Allfather to consider that before he makes this decision.”

Loki caught the double meaning: Yanden knew the decision had come from the one person of higher rank than Loki in this court: the king himself.

“He has already considered it,” Loki said quietly. “The decision is final.”

Yanden’s face was taut with fury. “I expect I need not tell you that the Kree government is not going to react well.”

“I am aware of the repercussions.”

“Yes, I thought you would be.” Yanden considered the dark-haired Asgardian for a moment. “Your Highness, I am overstepping the bounds of propriety to say this, but as things are already irreparably fractured between our respective leaders, I have nothing left to lose by giving you this warning. And something to gain.”

“What warning?” Loki snapped, focusing sharply on the blue-skinned Kree, wondering if there was an attack of some kind being planned, or an ambush-
“It is because I respect you, as you respect me, that I say this. You are aware that sometimes it is… difficult to see a situation clearly when one is too close.”

Loki nodded stiffly.

Yanden continued, each word a boulder, eyes fastened on the prince. “I see with fresh eyes the balance of power in this palace, Your Highness, and it rests with the Allfather first, then Prince Thor, then you. I know you and your brother are twins, thus the Allfather has yet to name his heir. You have been raised on the belief that you would one day be a king.” He leaned forward, face intense. “But they will never permit you to sit on that throne.”

Loki was grateful, then, for the centuries of experience he’d accumulated at hiding his expressions behind a pleasant, blank mask. He was sure that none of his fury was outwardly visible as he dipped his head once and said, “I thank you for your candor.”

Yanden bowed and left.

And over the following years, as the peace treaty collapsed in cinders and Thor dragged Odin and the rest of Asgard by the hair into a foolish, pointless war, Loki watched. He mastered the anger he’d felt that Yanden, a Kree ambassador, of all people, had been the first to notice the truth. He thought of his childhood, the countless memories of Thor and Sif and the Warriors Three running through the gardens while Loki struggled to keep up, of spending more and more time with his books and his mother, learning seidr and her style of fighting, because he knew where he was unwelcome.

It was a seed, really. Planted in his mind, just a speck that occasionally sent out a shoot into a childhood memory that had once been innocent and pure. And slowly Loki realized that Yanden’s words had wiped a film from his eyes.

He did not like the truths that he came to understand.
Last Thoughts

Above the Northern Atlantic

January 1944

Steve Rogers knew he was about to die.

He knew it as he spoke his last words to Peggy Carter. He knew it as he drove the plane nose-first into the ground. He knew it as he watched the picture of the woman he thought he might love go flying from the console on impact.

But it was not a clean death. Half-conscious, half-dead, Steve rolled himself onto his back on the floor behind the captain’s chair. His stolen flagship, crashing from the sky. A bitter smile twitched on his lips as his eyes slipped closed. It was fitting for an experiment, a made thing. And better that he end this way. Who would love him anyway? She’d have woken up in a week or a month or a year or three and thought, What am I doing? He’s a lab rat escaped from his cage and gone on to find another man. A normal one, who could give her all he couldn’t.

As Steve Rogers slipped into darkness (Captain America had died on impact, instantly gone) his one regret was that he hadn’t managed to save Bucky along with the rest of the world.

His last thought was I hope someone else can continue my job, fixing the wrongs in this fucked-up world.
“Natasha.”

She spun, unnervingly fast and graceful. “I work alone. You know this.”

“The orders came from higher up than me.” The blond man stood firm, his angular features carved in stone, hands clasped behind his back.

“To shackle the most effective operative Mother Russia has ever known to a useless newbie.”

A hint of a smile twitched the man’s lips. It was the first emotion that had shown on his face. “I think you will find he can match you in every way.”

Not a hint of skepticism showed on Natasha’s face but they both knew what she was thinking.

“Come.” The man spun on his heel and walked into the bunker.

Natasha followed without looking back.
A Trigger Pulled

Texas, United States
November 1963

The man’s hands tightened on the rifle.

Despite his anticipation, his index finger lay along the barrel rather than tucked into the trigger guard. He’d been trained well.

There was one other person in the small room with him, a dark-haired man in his forties who paced nervously behind the sniper.

“Stop,” the sniper said. His English was American and unaccented.

“Be quiet,” snarled the other man, also in English, though his had the faintest trace of a Russian accent from the recent decade he had lived in Minsk.

The sniper did not turn, and the pacing man did not seem to notice the increasing tension in the room.

“I don’t understand this,” the pacing man said, half to himself. “How are we going to get away?”

The sniper did not respond. He alone knew the whole plan.

Well, he and one other. But she was not here.

The sniper forced thoughts of his partner from his mind - they would only be a distraction - and checked out the window. A man on the street glanced up and saw him standing there. The sniper wondered in passing if the pacing man had noticed that the sniper’s hair had been cut and dyed to match the pacer’s. They looked similar enough from the distance between the window and the third man’s place on the sidewalk.

“I mean, I just get in the cab and say my address? And that’s the only code word?” the pacing man continued.

The sniper fixed the little man with a dead gaze.

The pacer was oblivious. “You’re sure of this? The driver will get me out?”

The sniper nodded once, stiffly.

“And you’ll get out on your own?” The pacing man pointed his finger at the sniper. “If you’re captured, you must not talk. Not a word of me, or that an employee let you up here, or anything, got it?”

The sniper nodded again and turned back to the window.

The car came into view.

The sniper leaned forward. He settled the rifle neatly along the windowsill. Lined up the sights.
Pulled the trigger once, twice, again.

The first shot went deliberately wide, to disguise his own pinpoint accuracy. The second punched through the President and into his male companion. The third completed the mission, splattering the inside of President Kennedy’s head across the car.

“Go.”

The little man left.

The sniper stowed the borrowed rifle beneath the boxes that had concealed his nest, checked that the floor was empty, and jogged for the stairwell.

The man who exited the stairwell on the first floor looked very different from the one who had entered it up on level six. He was sandy blond instead of dark-haired and wore a jacket of pale blue rather than brown. The dead eyes were gone, replaced by a cheerful crinkling, and his previously expressionless mouth now looked like it could curl at any second into a smile. He was unassuming, bought a bagel at the employee cafeteria, and left the building minutes before the police cordoned it off.

In the upheaval following the assassination of President Kennedy, a witness on the street alerted the police that he had seen a man with a rifle in the window of the book depository, and gave a description. Witnesses said they’d observed a man who worked at the book depository named Lee Oswald who matched the description leaving the building just before the police station. He was traced as having taken a bus, disembarking two blocks later, and hailing a cab. The cab driver reported that Oswald got increasingly nervous as the drive went, and was reluctant to exit the cab at the address he gave. He was the first witness to have seen any nervousness or upheaval in the demeanor of the suspect.

The landlady at the ex-Marine’s home claimed he was nervous and rushed, and left soon after he returned with a different jacket.

Oswald shot a police officer who apprehended him just minutes later.

He was dragged into the police station shouting about police brutality and how he’d been set up, that he was a patsy.

In the dramatic media coverage and the grief of a nation, no one remembered the man in the sky-blue jacket.
The couple strolling down the street in the twilight were far from normal.

Her auburn hair was piled on her head in a stylish updo. His was worn short and brown. Her dress and jacket were the height of fashion. He wore a long-sleeved coat and gloves that seemed slightly out-of-place despite the chill in the evening air.

Aside from the man’s coat, they looked every bit the European tourists, from West Germany, perhaps, or maybe Denmark. The man’s withdrawn demeanor indicated haughtiness (it wasn’t) and the woman’s expression told any who saw her that she was every bit in love with this city, these sights, this vacation (she wasn’t, at least not yet).

She hung on his arm, pointing to different buildings, exclaiming over the tiny family-owned Parisian restaurants that lined the street. He reacted rarely and did not smile, but to the other passerby, it was obvious that he loved his wife, and took pleasure from her joy.

They drifted through the city and returned to a hotel at a few minutes past midnight.

It was not their hotel.

No one in the lobby questioned the man and woman who looked every inch the upper-crust Middle European vacationer couple as they walked past the front desk. The woman nodded cordially at a bellboy and they stepped into the elevator without a backward glance.

Once inside, though, their demeanors changed entirely.

The woman’s lively demeanor vanished like melting wax dripping from her face. She ran her hands along the inside of her coat, checking the revolvers stored there, then the smoke grenades, then the stranglecord, then the three vials of poison. The man did the same along the inside of his calf-length coat. The metal of the weaponry made faint clinking sounds against his left hand as he rifled through the concealed pockets.

The one thing that did not change was the subtle change in their expressions that was visible only when one of them looked at the other. It was a softening of the muscles around their eyes, or a change in the shape of their lips, or a bleeding out of tension. It was a language all their own, indecipherable to an outside viewer. The only message that could be translated was a simple one.

This man and this woman cared about each other as neither did any other person alive.

No one watching could know exactly how true that was.

The elevator doors opened on floor nineteen. Floor twenty was reserved at the moment for the visiting British dignitaries.

The shaft closed. The elevator descended.

The woman glanced around the empty hallway, sank her fingers into the crack between the doors,
and hauled them apart.

She and the man who was not her husband swung deftly into the empty elevator shaft. It echoed with the clanks and mechanical noises of the equipment. While the woman slowly let the elevator doors close, keeping the noise at a minimum, the man carefully secured several packages from his pockets to the inside of the elevator.

They worked in perfect harmony with not a word needed to coordinate each movement.

In silence the woman attached three packages from her own jacket to the walls of the elevator shaft. They stood carefully balanced on a ledge that girded the open space; it was barely fifteen centimeters wide, yet neither of them faltered in so much as a step.

The woman was the first to leap from the ledge to the maintenance ladder above her head. She gripped the lowest rung and pulled her body up without any apparent trouble, scaling the ladder two grips at a time. The man hauled himself up one-handed and followed closely behind.

They balanced on the ledge next to the elevator doors one floor above. The woman drew the two revolvers from her pockets - old-fashioned Serbian models - and nodded to her partner.

He sank the fingers of his left hand into the crack between the doors and violently ripped them open.

Shouts came from the hallway on the other side. The woman was through the opening in less than a second, rolling to the side and coming up shooting. The pistols spat death from her hands as she fired with inhuman accuracy at the four guards in the corridor.

Her partner joined her as they crumpled to the floor.

She was a terrifying sight, spattered in blood that matched her hair. The dead-eyed expression on the man didn’t help. They ran in a silent, crouching gait.

Alerted by gunfire, the guards in the dignitary’s rooms shredded the hallway with automatic fire. The man and woman dove flat on their stomachs and soldier-crawled the last fifteen feet into position. The woman crouched while the man tore off his jacket and took a deep breath.

The man exploded through the door like a cannonball, shouting in Serbian as he laid into the men in the room. He fought hand-to-hand while the woman used the last two shots in her revolvers, dropped them on the floor, and drew a knife. She dove into the fight, looking more like a ballerina than an assassin. The man forcibly tore limbs from bodies and shattered ribs with his blows while the woman spun and leaped from one person to the next. Where she went, death followed.

They were through in seconds.

The room was bathed in blood. Six more guards lay dead on the floor, and the dignitary was moaning on the settee, not long for the world: the woman’s two shots had found their mark.

“Primary target down,” she said.

The man was not breathing any harder than he had been in the elevator shaft. His nice jacket was shredded in several places, and a gleam of silver showed through along his left arm.

“You are unharmed?” he said in Russian.

The woman replied in the same language. “Shallow scrape on my left arm. Yourself?”
“I am fine.”

She examined him with a critical eye. “No, you’re not.”

“Natasha-”

Natasha ignored the man’s protests, pushed him against the wall, and packed a torn pillowcase into the bullet wound in his side. She taped over it with brutal efficiency, aware of the seconds draining away before their exit window closed. “We wouldn’t want you bleeding out before we get out of the country, now, would we?” she asked, and looked up at her partner with a smirk.

He met her eyes for a long second, and then they were kissing, holding each other with as much aggression as was present when they fought. It was a clash of lips and tongues and teeth and hands. The man grunted when his wound was jostled. It only made him clutch Natasha tighter among the bodies of their enemies. Blood spatters from the both of them were smeared across their jackets and faces and fingers.

They broke apart at last, more out of breath than either had been from their battle.

“We should clean up,” Natasha said at last, smirking at the mess they’d made of each other.

For the first time, the hint of a smile quirked the man’s lips. Natasha ran a washcloth under the sink and tossed it to her partner. He wiped down his face and hands while she turned her jacket inside out. The reverse side was clean of blood. The man passed her the washcloth back and set to work on his own clothing. His shirt was shredded beyond repair; he made a noise of frustration and simply tore it off, revealing a rock-hard body and a scaled silver metal arm with a red star embossed on the shoulder. If he noticed how Natasha’s attention was captured briefly by this sight, he showed no sign of it, and retrieved his coat from the hall. With it buttoned up to his throat and his gloves on, all sign of the deadly assassin vanished.

Natasha paused for a few seconds to readjust her hair, and they slipped into the hallway as shouts and pounding feet came from below.

Hammering sounded against the barricaded stairwell door.

The man and woman froze. Their exit plan was scrapped.

Natasha was the first to recognize their opportunity. She led her partner to a laundry chute halfway between the stairwell and the massacre they had left behind, tugging open the metal covering. The chute was easily large enough for her, and probably wide enough for her partner’s shoulders.

With a quicksilver smile, she caught the upper edge of the gap and flung herself through feet-first, graceful and acrobatic.

The man was less coordinated. He climbed in, contorting his muscular frame to fit in the opening, and braced himself easily with the metal arm and his legs while he tugged the door closed, and not a second too soon. He could hear the footsteps of the downstairs guards, hotel security, and their horrified shouts as he closed his eyes, let go, and fell soundlessly into the shadows.

Natasha landed in a laundry cart, flexing her knees to absorb an impact that would likely have torn the tendons of ordinary humans. She dove out headfirst, rolled, and shot to her feet before the terrified maid by the washing machines even had time to scream. Natasha snapped the young woman’s neck without hesitation as her partner landed heavily in the laundry cart with a grunt.

They left the laundry room and found themselves in the staff-only region of the hotel. They’d both
memorized a map of the building before the mission, and took the turns in harmony without hesitation.

A group of bellboys, pausing for a smoke, stood outside the break room.

They looked up and saw a tipsy, wealthy couple giggling and leaning on one another.

“Bonjour!” Natasha said in a deliberately dreadful French accent.

“Hello, boys,” her partner said. He’d once more transformed from the cold killer into another person, this time a gregarious young man with a beautiful woman, out for a vacation in a foreign capital. “Think you could tell my wife and I the way to the lobby? I’m afraid we’re somewhat turned around.”

Natasha made a show of adjusting her clothes, careful to keep the jacket closed, as if her dress were mussed after a tryst in the back halls.

Sure enough, the young men were smirking. They looked perhaps five years younger than Natasha’s partner, at the most, though he was much older than he appeared.

“This way,” the one in the center said in excellent English, and began walking toward the lobby.

He deposited the drunken couple in the lobby and returned to his friends without the faintest idea of the events on the top floor, or that he had just given two international assassins their way out of his hotel.

Seconds later, an explosion bloomed in a hollow elevator shaft and rocked the hotel building.

In the ensuing chaos, the couple melted into the street outside the hotel and into the shadows around the memories of any witnesses. The deaths of the British dignitary and his guards were pinned on radical members of the Serbian Communist Party, thanks to the pistols Natasha left, which were the only trace of the killers.
Divided Loyalties

Siberia

March 1990

Natasha stood in the antechamber.

She knew the stakes. She knew exactly what had brought them here. She was painfully aware that the twisted love she shared with her partner was the exact reason he was in this position.

“Widow,” said the man nearest her, a soldier or a general, hard-faced and unyielding. He had aged much; the once-blond hair was now silver, and wrinkles lined his face. He had several secrets for every shadowy crease in his skin. They were the only people in the small room, and she knew the glass was one-way, and bulletproof. “Romanova. I know you’ve grown accustomed to working with your partner, but the steel fist of the Soviet Union is no longer necessary, and he’s been compromised. You know how dangerous that is.”

She ignored him.

The man standing in the chamber below them was her partner and her lover and her world. For him, she had stayed in this life. For him, she had left for the West and spent four years in deep cover in London so they could prove to their masters that neither of them was compromised.

How wrong she’d been. It had all been a trick.

Natasha remembered the message she’d gotten in her intel drop, a casual mention of operations to retrieve “the Winter Soldier” from Iran. She had done some quiet digging on her own when her suspicions were raised; normally, details of other missions would never have made it into her communications. Sure enough, the Winter Soldier (a ghost and a legend) was nowhere near the radical Islamist factions of the warring Middle East.

When the Winter Soldier was told Natasha was in the hands of Hezbollah, he was not so careful. And they’d caught him, and now here he was, Natasha’s partner, about to go on ice.

She could try to kill all these men and women. She knew she’d even get through many if not most of them before they could take her down. But take her down they would. They’d made her, and they had the precautions in place to break her, too.

So she took the burning, roiling, blood-red fury and packed it back and back and back until no trace of it showed in her body, until it was nothing but a pressure at the bottom of her mind.

“Yes, sir,” she said. The perfect soldier.

“Excellent.”

Below them, her partner turned and looked up at the glass that he knew hid his love from his sight. He wanted to speak to her, to tell her in the words neither of them had ever uttered, preferring instead the gifts made each other of lives saved, wounds bandaged, hearts stilled, but he wouldn’t make this any worse than it already was.

So he didn’t fight the effect on his mind when the anonymous masked scientist began to speak.
“Longing.”
“Rusted.”

Natasha saw him flinch, one of the only times he had ever revealed his reactions like that to the people in this ancient bunker.

“Furnace.”
“Daybreak.”

With each word, she watched him draw farther away from the world, and from her.

“Seventeen.”
“Benign.”

He began to shake and shudder, eyes closed, fists clenching. She wanted to reach out and touch him, to grip his biceps - one metal, one flesh - hard enough to damage him and remind him who he was.

“Nine.”
“Homecoming.”
“One.”
“Freight car.”

With the final word, he stilled. His face emptied of any personality, and an imperceptible change in his posture transformed him into a different person.

“Soldier?”

The scientist sounded nervous.

“Ready to comply.”

Audible relief washed the crew of scientists in the bunker.

Natasha looked at Malyen. “Do you wish me to watch, or may I go receive my next assignment?”

Malyen smiled. “Do stay, dear Natasha.”

So it was a test, then. Well, she would not fail.

No trace of her agony nor of her fury showed in her body as her partner, the Winter Soldier, killed the three children held against the far wall of the chamber. Their deaths were not slow, and she knew it would horrify the tiny flame of humanity he had somehow managed to cling to all this time when (if) the neural programming ever faltered. Because it would horrify him, it horrified her as well, but she did not react.

And then, with both arms - silver and tan alike - painted from nails to elbows in blood, he walked out of the room and didn’t look back.

Malyen watched her the whole time.

At last, she turned to the man who had been her handler for as long as she could remember. She was
technically the elder, but while she looked to be in her late twenties or possibly early thirties, every one of his eighty-six years showed on his body, despite the care he took. He’d be forced into retirement in a few years, she knew, his usefulness to their organization outlived.

“Are you satisfied?”

Malyen nodded at last. “Indeed I am, my spider. It seems that you managed to avoid being compromised with your partner. Well done.” He paused. “I know you are accustomed to working with him, Widow. You have been an effective pair.”

“You sever your best operatives with this move,” she said.

“He is compromised.”

“I would not wish to work with a compromised partner. I merely inquire if I will be assigned another, or return to solo work.”

Malyen paused. “You will be alone, for now. But there may be another partner at some point. Perhaps this Winter Soldier may even be returned to me.”

Her expression did not change. “I would prefer otherwise.”

“Congratulations, Widow,” Malyen said after another minute of silence.

She did not acknowledge the praise. Before her soldier, she wouldn’t have cared about it. Now, she did care: she hated this man, and hated that he approved of her actions.

But he would not know, not until it was too late.

“Come. Your next assignment will be to infiltrate…”
Betrayal

Siberia

October 1995

The bunker was gone.

Natasha stood next to her stolen helicopter and stared in disbelief. The bunker had vanished as if it had never been there. The tundra was smooth, white, and unmarked.

Her memory had never failed her but she scrabbled through her pockets until her gloved hands found her GPS, one of the newest models and one that wasn’t even available on the public market, hoping desperately this was the first time in the seventy-two years since the Red Room took her, changed her, that she was remembering wrong.

Natasha’s heart sank. The coordinates were correct.

She bolted back into the helicopter and, with shaking hands, activated the rotors. It snarled to life and lifted off the ground, engine whining without its warm-up, but she didn’t care.

The spy’s hands flew over the weapons console, aiming two bunker-busters she’d loaded up as a last resort at the ground where she knew the bunker door had been five and a half months ago. Five months in deep cover, and this happened.

Natasha was no stranger to explosions. She pulled ear protection over her head and pressed the button. The missiles screamed from the helicopter to the ground two hundred feet below. She closed her eyes against the resulting fireball.

When she touched down next to the crater and flew out of the helicopter, diving down into its bottom with the grace that wouldn’t leave her limbs even when she was desperate and grieving and furious, she found nothing but scorched earth and flakes of stone. What she did not find was the upper level of the bunker, which should have been there but wasn’t.

Wait.

Natasha scrabbled with her hands until she uncovered the sheet metal. Her heart sank when she realized it was a lone piece of scrap, not a clue that might lead toward a way into the bunker if they’d only removed the top levels, but at least she could see the logo on it.

The KGB, or what was left of it.

Natasha’s eyes narrowed. Her lips pulled back from her teeth in a feral snarl.

She carried the piece of scrap with her back up to the helicopter and made sure it was secure in the back before she lifted off and aimed it back toward Naiba. She’d catch a flight from the Russian port city to Moscow for her next check-in. Malyen would be there, as her handler, and she would make the rotten fossil of a man regret having taken her Soldier, and then she would paint Russia in the blood of the entire rotten organization.

But that would take funds. Momentum. Assistance, possibly, and information: all things she didn’t have, and that would take years to obtain. She’d play it smart. Play the long game.
The only thing Natasha Romanova was sure of was that she would never do another thing for the KGB again.

Except destroy it.

*Am I not merciful?*
The city was sweltering. Clint rubbed his hands compulsively along his pants to get rid of the sweat, knowing it would be back in less than a minute but unable to help himself.

Though he would never admit it out loud, he knew some of the sweat was from nerves, not the heat. *Why did Fury send me of all people? A green agent with a track record of deviating from the operational plan.* He knew everyone else at SHIELD had collectively shit their pants when the assignment was made known to the higher-ups, but Fury hadn’t backed down, and the aging Director Jones didn’t question the Head of Operations. Fury had chosen Clint Barton, so Clint Barton it would be.

Clint couldn’t help wondering how big a mistake that had been.

He scaled the construction equipment with ease, his compound bow hidden in his toolbox and the quiver concealed as a roll of plastic sheeting on his back. He wore a bright orange vest and a yellow hard hat and carefully disguised the trained command over his body that SHIELD had given him. His target was deadly and impossibly skilled; he’d been warned that the slightest discrepancy in her environment would send her running and the last ten years of trying to track her would be down the drain.

Translation: Don’t fuck up, Clint.

The brown-haired man found his position, most of the way up the tower, and settled into the shack. He plunked his case down, pulled out a sandwich and an iPhone, and did his best to imitate a lazy worker taking his lunch while he waited for his shift to start.

At noon exactly, he put the phone aside and began rummaging around in the toolbox.

The first shot he fired from his perch was a lightweight arrow, designed to disintegrate on impact, leaving nothing but the directional mike behind. Fury had personally ordered that the young agent be given access to the tech. It was new, and he’d almost been shot down (ha), but in the end the Head of Ops had overridden everyone else.

Clint guessed it’d be nice to have that kind of pull.

He screwed an earpiece into his ear and pretended to mess with the unrolled plastic sheeting (his quiver lay on the platform, invisible to anyone below) while he listened to the meeting. Thankfully, it was in English.

“Widow.”

Clint twitched. They’d been right. The Black Widow really was here. He’d been half convinced it was a screw-up from Intelligence that said she’d be taking a client here this afternoon.

“Mr Darcy. Quite an interesting alias, by the by. Wouldn’t have pegged you for an Austen fan.”

The voice was female. Smooth, confident, laced with a threat and a promise. Clint started to understand why everyone was so freaking terrified of this woman when they didn’t have pictures,
prints, or anything to say who she really was. Scuttlebutt said the Black Widow was a myth.

He almost wished they hadn’t had to upgrade his clearance for this, because it would make awesome gossip points in the cafeteria.

He, Clint Barton, was about to kill the Black Widow.

It wasn’t his first life taken. Nor would it be the last. But Clint had seen the files, done his paperwork, and he knew exactly how dangerous this woman was.

He gave in to his curiosity and bellied over to the edge, watching her through the window of the building, several stories below his viewpoint.

The young agent’s eyebrows shot upward when he focused on the woman.

She was… damn.

He’d been born with accuracy enhancement and brilliant eyesight, which had made him a neighborhood menace to cats and birds once his uncle got him a slingshot for his seventh birthday. There had been times when Clint kind of hated the ability because it had also resulted in some bullying, but on days like this? No. He would not be complaining about being able to see easily into that room, because this woman was scary awesome and he could tell the arrogant paunchy Spanish prick in there was about to get his ass either verbally or physically handed to him. Clint didn’t want to miss a second of it.

He hoped he’d get the intel SHIELD wanted out of this interaction before he started to root for her.

The prick shrugged. “Well, I’m hardly a Bingley.”

Clint didn’t get the reference.

The woman smirked. “Somehow I think you’re more of a Collins.”

“Hey, that’s not-”

The Black Widow leaned back against the wall. The lithe viciousness in her movement halted the man’s words in his tracks. Clint strongly suspected the dude was both terrified and turned on, and trying not to show either.

“So,” he said at last. “I have a contract for you.”

“I’m not cheap.”

The prick leered at her. “I can afford it.”

Clint imagined sending an arrow through the client’s neck.

“What’s the job?”

The client gave a name, someone Clint didn’t recognize but memorized anyway, just to be safe.

“I don’t kill just anyone, you know.”

“How do you feel about a woman named Emilia Jones?”

Clint’s grip on his bow tightened to the breaking point. That name…
This man was about to send the Black Widow against the director of SHIELD.

“Never heard of her,” the Widow said, sounding bored.

The archer grabbed a length of high-tensile cable from the toolbox and fastened one end to the platform with a magnetic clamp. The other was hooked to an arrow and he aimed the bow carefully at the window below.

“She’s the director of an organization called SHIELD,” the client began.

Clint saw the woman’s head snap up. “You’re going after SHIELD?”

“Is that a problem?”

“Yes.”

An arrow shattered the window and found its place in the client’s upper thigh.

The Widow moved, but Clint was already firing his second arrow and hooking his suit to the cable and leaping from the platform. He shot silently through the air, slammed feetfirst through the remains of the window, rolled, and came up with an arrow aimed at the Widow’s throat.

He didn’t fire. She didn’t move.

After a long moment, during which the client gasped and squealed on the floor, the Widow raised an eyebrow. “I thought SHIELD would send someone older.”

“I thought you’d be older,” he replied.

She smirked. “I look younger than I am.”

“If I interrogate this prick, are you going to kill me?” Clint asked.

“No.”

“Are you going to run?”

“No.”

Slowly, he lowered his bow. The Widow didn’t move.

Clint stepped backward until the client was between them, keeping his eyes on the redhead the whole time. He didn’t look away from her even as he knelt and gripped the arrow sticking out of the client’s leg.

“Why did you want to kill Emilia Jones?” he asked.

“I’m not telling you anything,” the man gasped.

Clint twisted the arrow, pushed it in farther. The man screamed.

“Pansy,” the archer muttered. He wondered if he’d imagined the twitch of the Widow’s lips.

“What’s your name?” the Widow said suddenly.

Clint grinned at her. “I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours.”
“Mary Allen.”

He snorted. “And I’m Michael Jackson. Nice to meet you, Mary. Okay, come on, you bastard, answer the question.” He jerked the arrow again and produced another scream.

“No,” the man gasped after the shriek petered out.

The Widow was by his side so quickly Clint realized she probably would’ve dodged if he’d shot at her from the point-blank range of thirty seconds ago. No wonder she hadn’t looked nervous; she’d never really been in danger.

“Watch and learn, kid,” she said, and a tiny oyster-shucking knife appeared between her fingers. She laid it against the client’s cheek and smiled at him. “Now,” she purred, “you’re going to answer this man’s question. Or I carve your face off.”

It took three minutes for the sobbing man on the floor to yield the information he wanted.

“I presume you’re not taking him back to SHIELD,” the Widow said at last, looking down at the bloody, wounded mess on the floor.

Clint looked, too. This wasn’t his first rodeo. He’d had to use torture before. But the coldness and apathy of the Widow was something entirely knew, and terrifying. “My orders were to find out who he wanted to send an assassin after, then kill him.” He left off the fact that the Widow was supposed to be dead now, too.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “If you leave him here, it’ll raise a scene.”

Clint heaved a sigh. “Well, it’s an old building, lots of outdated electrical wiring… Really, this whole place is a fire hazard.”

“And me?”

Clint walked to the window, pulled the directional mike off the outside wall, and turned it off. He didn’t need a recording of this bit.

“I was ordered to kill you too,” he said.

“But you didn’t.”

“I could have.”

“I’m impressed,” the Widow said slowly. “I knew SHIELD was coming today, but I had no idea you were up there. You had the drop on me.”

Clint bowed, trying to hide how proud that made him.

“Why didn’t you take the shot?”

The young agent looked at his target.

It wasn’t the first time he’d deviated on a mission. There was a reason most of the SHIELD higher-ups didn’t like him. The problem was Clint’s intuition. His gut had never steered him wrong in his life, and he wouldn’t apologize for following his instincts. They were usually right. And right now, he was certain that this woman didn’t need to die.

“You’re not my enemy.”
“You sound sure.”

“That’s because I am.”

“So you’re just going to let me walk away?”

“I guess that’s up to you, isn’t it?”

She nodded slowly, eyes never leaving his face.

And spoke abruptly. “I want to come in.”

Clint blinked. That was… unexpected. “Ah… why?”

She shrugged gracefully. “I’d rather work for the good guys than continue doing this.”

She could be lying, but…

“We’ll have to fight our way out. There’s a huge task force coming in for you. Fury sent me in to take you out before they got here.”

“Who sent them?”

“Can we table that conversation? We have less than two minutes.”

“Deal,” she said, and faster than he could react, she had two pistols in her hands. He realized he’d never really had the drop on her. It was an uncomfortable feeling. “You’ve got an exit plan?”

He grinned. “Car in a garage three miles south.”

She stared. “That’s it?”

“I wasn’t supposed to be down here,” he snapped. “I guess we’ll have to wing it.”

“Fine,” the red-haired woman said irritably. “Lead the way, rookie.”

Clint squinted at her. “You gonna shoot me in the back?”

“If I wanted you dead, you would be already. Quit wasting time.”

She could just be using him as backup until she was free of this mess - but no, she’d spared him and wanted to come with him before she knew about the task force. So she was probably telling the truth. Mostly.

Clint nodded once and left the room, the Black Widow behind him. He made little noise. She made none.
Natasha clenched her fists.

It was the last test before she could be operational for SHIELD. Before she could get back to doing what she did best. Before she could continue her search for her Soldier, this time with the considerable access and financial resources provided her by the most widespread intelligence agency the world had ever seen.

It helped that SHIELD, at least, was actively trying to help people. Unlike her old handlers.

“Strobe.”

“Nineteen.”

“Telephone.”

“Recorded.”

She controlled the flinches. Resisted the neural programming that roared up at the first syllable of “nineteen” and tried to take over, to wipe her away, to turn her into their weapon.

She was her own weapon now. Not SHEILD’s, not anyone’s.

“Citation.”

“Silicon.”

The urge was strong. She fought it, ignored it, as she’d been practicing for three years of SHIELD therapy. They couldn’t use her until she was safe. She had to prove herself.

“Bookshelf.”

“Grief.”

“Ruble.”

“Upholstered


“Soldier. Ready to comply?”

She stood in one fluid movement. “No.”

“Soldier. Ready to comply.”

The SHIELD psychologist looked caught between nervousness and relief. “No. I am Natasha Romanova, the Black Widow, and I’ve passed your test.”

A voice crackled over the loudspeakers. “She’s clean.”
The psychologist looked up. “Sir-”

“I said, she’s clean.”

A door hissed open across the lab, and a tall man in an eye patch stalked through. He nodded sharply to Natasha, speaking now in person rather than through the microphone still clipped to his collar. “Agent Romanoff. Welcome to Shield.”

She nodded once, accustomed by now to the Americanized version of her name. “Appreciated.”

“Come with me. You’ll be partnered with Agent Barton. He’s waiting in the atrium.”

Natasha followed her new handler out of the lab.

“Our bargain holds?” she asked.

He raised an eyebrow. “I’m not stupid enough to cross you.”

She grinned. It still felt odd, but here, with these people… it was the first time since her Soldier that she had met anyone she even wanted to relax with.

Not completely. Slight relaxation. Enough to smile, on occasion.

“Just checking.”

“Yes, you’ll operate on my orders alone. Yes, you’ll work by yourself or with Barton. Yes, we will disavow all knowledge of you if you’re ever caught. Satisfied?”

“Yes.” No. She didn’t trust him. But that was because she didn’t trust anyone.

They entered the atrium, which was less a proper atrium and more a dingy lobby with skylights - SHIELD liked to keep a low-profile. “Atrium” was more a joke than anything else.

Barton waited across the room, leaning on the wall and tapping away at his phone. He grinned when he saw them. “Passed your test, I see.”

Natasha smiled tightly. “KGB brainwashing has been overridden. I am now operational.”

“Congratulations.”

The man had grown up a lot in the two years since they’d met. She knew he had done his fair share of operations while she’d been cooped up with the scientists, carefully picking apart the neural programming that had left her to the mercy, once, of anyone who knew the words. He seemed quieter, now, and older, as if his body had aged only half as much as his mind. But he still had a smile for her.

“Agents,” Fury said, “here is your first assignment.” He handed a manila folder to Barton. “Don’t forget to burn it. You’re my secret weapon, you two. Don’t make me regret it.”

Barton laughed. “Bet you didn’t see this coming when you put her on the kill list, sir.”

Fury raised his one visible eyebrow at the younger agent. “Let’s just say it was no accident I sent a volatile young agent with a history of deviance after our friend the Widow here.” He nodded at her and clapped a hand on Barton’s shoulder. “Prove me right, Agents.”

The tall man marched away, the ever-present black duster snapping around his calves.
“There’s not even any wind,” Barton complained. “How does he make that stupid coat do that?”

Natasha’s lips twitched. “Even the fabric is afraid of him.”

Bartons snorted. “Oh, look, you do have a sense of humor. Who would have guessed.”

“Keep it up, Barton, and you’ll see how funny I am.”

He looked at her oddly. “Barton?”

Natasha blinked, and was instantly annoyed with herself; she knew Barton was sharp enough to pick up on the physical tell. She was getting sloppy. “It’s your name.”

“Nah.” He grinned, arms out to the sides, manila folder dangling from his fingers as he walked backwards toward the front doors. “I’m Michael Jackson, remember?”

“You can’t sing,” she reminded him.

He waved a hand. “Semantics.”

Natasha shook her head and pushed out the doors ahead of him, wondering how exactly this agent, more than forty years her junior, had managed to get past her defenses so easily.

Maybe it was because he trusted her.

She still couldn’t figure out why he had decided to do so with such ease.

“Seriously, though. We’re partners now. Call me Clint or this is going to be awkwardly formal.”

“Is that a usual thing? Among SHIELD?”

“It’s a usual thing for friends.”

She glanced over. He hid his sudden insecurity well, but she played roles for a living. In comparison, he was still an amateur. “Is that what we are? Friends?”

“I sure hope so, or I’m going to be embarrassed,” he muttered, and she knew that tactic too: deflection through flippancy.

“I’ve not had many friends,” she admitted, and unbidden, a face shoved into her mind: cold eyes, brown hair, strong jaw. Her Soldier. The rage pulsed and howled against the years of barriers that held it down. She blinked and kept it shoved away. Locked up.

It was not a healthy psychological tactic, she knew that, but she didn’t care.

Barton - Clint - smirked. “I figured. So are we friends?”

“I do not think I know how.”

“That’s okay, you’ll sort it out.”

She examined his trusting blue-gray eyes. Remembered, unbidden, how he had lowered his bow in that room in Budapest, and the stubbornness with which he had defended himself when he arrived back at the headquarters with a world-famous ex-KGB assassin in tow, and how he was willing to work with her and offer her this hand of companionship even after he’d seen her ledger and the red pouring from its pages.
“Friends, then,” she said.

The smile that split his face was blinding.
To Break a Prince

Asgard

July 2009, Midgardian calendar

He stared up at his brother and his father and a thousand emotions boiled inside his mind until he thought he would explode.

“I could have done it, Father!” he screamed. “I could have done it for you! For all of us!”

If he could just make them understand. If he could just make them see that he’d been trying to fix the world so they would all see the truth as he did, see how they’d marginalized and disrespected him for centuries until even a prince of Asgard could be mocked by a servant. He had to make them see that he’d never meant for Thor to go to Jotunheim, or be exiled, or to die; he’d just adapted when his plans to prove himself a good son and a good ruler spiraled wildly out of control.

And then Loki had found out that he was a Jotun, and there was the other half of his turmoil. Betrayal; grief; loss; fear; shame; and all of it was overshadowed by a vast and unending rage.

It was the first time in centuries that he let all of this show on his face, the wild emotions mixing into a volatile cocktail of desperation.

“No, Loki,” Odin said, as unmovable as Yggdrasil.

The false prince loosened his fingers.

Thor’s scream followed Loki down into the abyss.

Deep Space

Not Long After

Loki didn’t know how far he’d fallen, only that it had seemed an eternity compressed into a heartbeat then expanded to fill the universe. As if time ceased to be.

And now here he was, coughing up blood as he lay on his back on some barren rock in a corner of the universe, somewhere in the dark spaces between the realms, where even Asgard rarely ventured.

“Impressive. They really do make them strong on Asgard. Or should I say Jotunheim?” The words were accompanied by a cruel, gravelly laugh.

Loki forced himself to sit up, turn, and stand. His head spun. He wasn’t dead - how in the Nine Realms had that happened?

But he was nothing if not good at improvising, and he was heir to two thrones. He would meet this twist in the Norns’ design with dignity, as befitted a prince.

Or a king.

The creature who looked back at him was nothing Loki had ever seen. Humanoid, with pitted purplish skin and fiery, luminous eyes. It wasn’t a good light, though. The gleam in the thing’s irises
as he peered out from behind an ornate gold helm was one of pure, undiluted madness.

“Give me your name,” Loki demanded, drawing himself upright. His entire body was screaming but he ignored it. He’d definitely been in worse shape before in his immortal life, although he couldn’t remember exactly when at the moment.

The creature snorted. “Look at the little princeling, thinking to give me orders.”

“I am Loki Laufeyson of Jotunheim,” Loki snarled, “heir to the thrones of both the Frost Giants and the Aesir. You will give me your name, and the respect owed to a king.”

“Oh, the arrogance! How it betrays you, son of Laufey.” The creature stood, and a dark, perverted power rolled through across the bitter surface of whatever odd half-realm they inhabited. It wasn’t anything but an asteroid, really, and it spun: Loki could see the stars wheeling by in the distance, constellations unknown. Yet there was atmosphere, and gravity.

He’d read something about this phenomenon, once…

“I am Thanos.” The creature descended from his floating throne and glared into Loki’s eyes. “And I will give you no such courtesy. You see…”

He spun and threw out an arm as the asteroid’s rotation slowly brought their surroundings into view.

Loki fought to keep his breath even. It was an army, of creatures such as he’d only hear of: the Chitauri, cannibalistic humanoids with a connected neural system, and it was massive.

“I also hold a throne,” Thanos finished, sneering. That strange power surged, pulsed, and reached for the prince’s mind.

Loki threw every scrap of his seidr into a barrier. He was one of the most powerful seidr masters in the Nine Realms; he could match this foul thing -

But he was weak from his battle with Thor, and from his fall through the worlds, and in the end, it was not enough.
Heartbreak

New York

December 2010

Darcy had to admit that she wasn’t a huge fan of Jane’s extraterrestrial boyfriend.

Sure, he was cut, but she just could not get past the condescension. Oh, little mortals, let me protect you! I love Midgard! My brother sucks!

Blech.

So while she enjoyed checking out his shoulders and his butt, she couldn’t exactly say she was sad to see him go.

Mostly she was just sad that Jane was sad, and that only made her want to exact a little revenge from the realm-ditching boyfriend.

“Jane. Hey. Hey. Enough working, come on, we’re going out for sushi.”

“No, I… this data… needs… process…” Jane said absently, and pinned another paper to a corkboard already covered with them.

“Jane. It’s nine o’clock on a Friday night. The data will still be there tomorrow morning. We are going out for sushi or so help me God I am going to hack your computer and start closing windows.”

Jane looked horrified. “No!”

Darcy looked at her phone. “I want it turned off in thirty seconds.”

Jane’s fingers flew with increased desperation, her keyboard rattling.

“Ten… nine… eight… seven…” Darcy tapped her own keyboard menacingly.

“Okay! Okay, I’m done!” Jane closed the laptop and powered off the network of computers that ringed her lab.

Darcy smirked. “Excellent.”

She considered it a victory when Jane only shot one longing glance back at the lab before they climbed into the elevators.

Truth be told, Darcy was glad of the excuse to get out as well. They both had rooms in the brand-new energy-neutral Stark Tower; after Puente Antiguo, SHIELD had put Jane in contact with Tony Stark. He’d brought Jane on at Stark Industries since he was a SHIELD consultant as well, and boom, now Darcy, one-time political science major, was now an assistant to one of the world’s most brilliant astrophysicists at one of the world’s most valuable and successful tech companies in the world. She still couldn’t figure out exactly how that had happened, but she liked it. The pay was good, the health benefits were better, and she got hazard pay whenever she had to drive Jane into a storm zone, which definitely hadn’t happened in the internship days. Not to mention Tony Stark himself. The dude was old enough to be her father, but he snarked right back at Darcy on a regular basis, which was a nice change after a year working for a woman who definitely did not appreciate the nuances of sarcasm and witty comebacks.
So yeah, life was good. Darcy was getting off an elevator from the eighty-ninth floor of Stark Tower, she had an awesome flat in New York, and she was going out for sushi with her best (only) friend.

Which meant, of course, that the universe just had to throw a wrench at her face.

With her history, she really should’ve expected it.

This wrench (it was just the latest of a veritable pile of them that littered Darcy’s whole life story) came in the form of a certain cocky-ass alien with a god complex who landed on the Stark Tower landing pad with a clap of thunder and dramatic swirling storm clouds.

Jane shrieked when she heard it, bolted right back into the elevator, and slammed the button for 94.

“Fuck it all,” Darcy hissed, and jumped in right before the doors closed.

New York

December 2010

Jane’s heart was in her throat as she hurtled out of the elevator.

Stark was across the room. It was his top floor, which a few people had access to, although the unspoken rule was that you left Stark’s space to Tony Stark and Pepper Potts unless invited. It was also the level with access to the balcony and Stark’s landing pad, which was why Jane was breaking all the rules and running as fast as she could across the common room, ignoring Stark as she did so. Darcy was behind her. Darcy would handle the egocentric billionaire. That was-

Thor.

Jane paused on the balcony, heart full to bursting. He was right there. Tall and blond and cloak snapping in the wind, Mjolnir in his hand. Exactly as she remembered.

She strode toward him and he toward her.

Crack.

Thor raised a hand to his cheek and stared at her.

“Where have you been?” she shouted, and slapped him again. “It’s been a year and a half, Thor! And you couldn’t be bothered to, I don’t know, drop in and leave a message? “Hey, Jane, I’m alive”?”

“Jane, I am sorry,” Thor said, seizing both of her wrists and staring beseechingly at her. “It is just that…” He sighed. “Loki’s actions have caused chaos throughout the Nine Realms. Many have seen it as a sign of Asgardian weakness and rebelled against peaceful civilizations; I have been struggling for much of this time to restore peace and order.”

“Oh,” she said, and found her anger somewhat deflated. “Well. As far as excuses go, it’s… not terrible…”

Thor smiled, but there was something off about it.

“Is something wrong?” Jane asked, reaching for him, this time wanting nothing but the comfort of touching him, knowing that he was real and here. But he resisted, and she let her hand drop. He released the gentle hold he’d taken of her wrists. They fell limply to her sides.
That was when Jane knew something was very, very wrong.

She was a scientist. She processed data for a living. Everything about this encounter was screaming wrong, wrong, wrong to her mind.

“Jane?”

Darcy’s voice came from behind her. Jane was suddenly very grateful for her friend, because she could tell from that one word that Darcy was ready to go toe-to-toe with a god (kind of) for her.

“It’s fine,” Jane said without turning. “Um… just… give us a moment, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” Darcy said, and Jane heard the balcony door hiss closed a few seconds later.

Thor took a breath. “Jane-”

“Spit it out,” she said. She hated when people danced around truth. “Just - say it.”

“My father has ordered us apart,” Thor said.

Jane blinked. “What?”

Thor held up his free hand in surrender. “I am the Crown Prince; there is little I can do in this instance. The order has been given. You are Midgardian; I am Aesir. It would never work.”

“So Aesir cannot marry with humans?” Jane snapped. “What are we, livestock?”

“Aesir can marry those of Midgard,” Thor said slowly. “The Apples of Idunn make it possible. But I am the Crown Prince. It would not be… seemly.”

Jane gritted her teeth. White-hot anger dripped down her spine, turning it to steel. She glared at Thor. “So because I’m a human, I’m inferior, is that it? Not worthy of your love?”

Thor’s brows furrowed. “We spoke no vows of love.”

“Oh, you bastard,” Jane breathed. She wanted to slap him again, but she knew he’d catch her wrist this time, the element of surprise gone. So she lashed at him with her words instead. “You bigoted idiotic arrogant rot-brained coward!”

Thor drew himself up, blue eyes flashing. She couldn’t believe she’d once found them kind. “I am not a coward.”

“Yes you are,” she snarled, poking him in the chest. It probably hurt her finger more than it did him. “You’re a coward, Thor Odinson, rolling over like a dog because your father commands it! You’re just following orders, is that it? Such a good and noble little soldier!”

“I cannot disobey my king,” Thor said tightly. “It would be high treason.”

“This is why monarchies suck ass.”

Jane twisted around and saw Darcy, who’d emerged once again, and stood fifteen feet away, scowling. She’d never been more glad to hear her friend’s sarcastic voice.

“Lady Darcy,” Thor greeted, always polite.

“Asshole,” Darcy said pleasantly. “I think it’s time for you to go.”
“I-” Thor paused. “Have you any of those pastries… pip-tarts?”

“Oh for God’s sake,” Darcy snapped, and Tasered him.

The Aesir convulsed and collapsed, Mjolnir falling with a *boom* to the balcony.

“You okay?” Darcy asked, stepping closely to Jane’s side. Jane saw Stark, for once exercising tact and waiting just inside the glass.

“Yeah,” she said, and then looked down. “Wait. No. No, I am not okay.”

Thor moaned, opened his eyes, and slowly climbed to his feet. “Huh,” Darcy said, “guess this little guy is less effective when you’ve got your shocky hammer back. It’s time for you to leave now, big guy.”

“Jane,” Thor said. “I am sorry.”

“I don’t want your apology,” Jane said angrily. “Go back to your palace, Prince.” She could see that her words were hurting him and couldn’t help enjoying it, even though she knew she’d probably regret it later, when the anger drained away. “Go home and drink ale. Maybe *Sif* will make you a *seemly* wife.”

She turned away.

She and Darcy were almost inside when the roar of the Bifrost sounded. Jane whipped around and saw the Einstein-Rosen Bridge disappear into the sky.

“Did I leave the instruments on?” she asked.

Darcy choked. “Only you, Janey. Let’s get inside.”

The doors hissed open, and the two young women stepped out of the chill evening air.

“Everything good?” Stark said, and now Jane knew where his tact had come from; Ms Potts was standing behind him. “What did Point Break want this time? And did you ask about his psychotic baby brother?”

“No,” Darcy snapped, “we were too busy dealing with him dumping Jane after a year of no contact.”

Jane closed her eyes. She could feel herself tearing up.

Stark opened his mouth. Ms Potts promptly covered it with her slim hand and looked at the scientist and the assistant. “You are both excused from work today,” she said.

“Thanks, ginger,” Darcy said. Any other time, Jane would’ve reprimanded her, but right now…

She just walked silently to the elevator. Darcy followed.

Jane forced herself to wait until they found their guest rooms before she let the tears fall.
“No, I will not force her to speak with you,” Tony Stark snapped.

The man on the screen scowled. “Stark-”

“Fury, I highly recommend investing in blood pressure medication, but right now I have other things to do.”

“Stark!”

“Please hold,” Tony said in a fake-polite voice, and cut off the SHIELD director’s next words as he dramatically slapped a button on his desk.

“I have told you, sir, it would be much more efficient to transfer the holding command to my network,” JARVIS said.

“Yeah, but the button is so much more satisfying,” Tony said, leaning back in his chair. “If I don’t get to dramatically slam my flip phone closed anymore, I’m definitely keeping the button. What’s next?”

“Ms Potts has informed me that you have a meeting in eleven minutes with the financial team.”

“Yeah, no thanks. What else?”

“Sir, I get the distinct impression that you wish to cancel any remaining appointments today and continue working on the Mark II.”

Tony paused. “Damn, I did a good job programming you. Yes. Do that. I’ll be in my lab.” He stood up and began to walk out of the room.

“Tony!”

Shit.

“Pepper!” he said, smiling wide and turning to embrace his girlfriend.

She dodged him neatly, looking sleek and perfect as always in her business skirt, matching jacket, and heels. “Tony, have you prepared to meet with the financial team?”

“Ah, about that-”

“No,” she said.

“Come on. Just - it’s one day.”

“And you do this every day. You are going to that meeting.”

He eyed the red-headed woman cleverly. “Well, what if I skipped?”

“I’m locking down the lab,” she said instantly. “I’m CEO. I can do that.”
“And I own a stock majority, so…”

“Go to the financial meeting and I’ll let you off the hook with Merges and Acquisitions this afternoon.”

“Done. JARVIS, find me a suit.”

“In your office, sir.”

“Excellent. Pepper, we’re going to dinner tonight.”

“Tony, I have-”

“JARVIS, cancel whatever of Ms Potts’ appointments is clashing with my dinner plans.” Tony spun and walked backwards while pointing at his girlfriend, whose face was caught somewhere between smiling and angry. “Seven o’clock. There’ll be a limo out front. Be there.”

“Tony-”

“Enjoy Merges and Acquisitions!” he fired over his shoulder, and disappeared down the hallway.

As he walked, the dark-haired man couldn’t help whistling, hands stuffed in his pockets. He’d shut down Fury, gotten out of half his meetings, and arranged things with Pepper. This was the happiest he’d been in a long time, since-

The flashback came on fast and brutal, slamming into his senses. In less than a second he was back in the desert.

*Blistering wind. Hot as hell. Staring a missile with his name on it in the face and thinking with hysteria that this had to be the biggest irony in a life littered with them.*

Tony snapped back to the present and found himself leaning on the wall, breathing hard.

“Sir, are you-”

“I’m fine, JARVIS,” Tony growled, good mood effectively ruined. “And find me a restaurant with a table for two at seven-thirty. Something expensive.”

“Consider it done.”

He absently rubbed his fingers over the arc reactor through his T-shirt as he stepped into his other office to change.

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*Washington, D.C., United States*

*February 2011*

Nick Fury pegged the phone across the room.

It slammed into the far wall, bounced off, and hit the floor. It was the latest in smartphone tech, a piece that was far from available to the general public, and luckily did not break.
“Agent Hill!” he bellowed.

The brunette woman was in his office in seconds; she’d been waiting for the call to finish. “Yes?”

“Pull Coulson off Widow watch and kick him over to Stark’s place. I need to speak with Jane Foster yesterday.”

“Yes, sir. Who would you like to replace him on Widow watch?”

“Pick someone. And send Agent Barton to track Banner’s exact location; you can take his place with Selvig’s team.” Might as well fulfill a request while he was punting people around. "No contact, surveillance only. He’s to stay undetected at all costs.”

“Barton is Romanoff’s partner.”

“She doesn’t get a say. Her choice to drop off the grid. I want it done yesterday.”

Hill’s face tightened, but she gave him a sharp nod, spun on her heel, and left.

Fury sighed and rubbed his forehead.

Everything was so unstable right now. The Widow had dropped off the grid two weeks ago, as she occasionally did, and though she’d given him almost a decade of extremely successful service, it still made him jumpy every time. If Barton knew where she was, the Hawk wasn’t telling.

Then there was the erratic and narcissistic Stark, the matter of keeping track of Banner without revealing his location, the question of Captain America, and now this whole mess with the Foster woman. He knew she was distraught about her alien boyfriend but he had no patience for the sentiment. Fury needed answers.

And then there was the cube.

“Agent Lang,” he said, sticking his head out the door.

The agent who served basically as a secretary looked up from his computer. “Sir?”

“Get me a progress report on Phase Two, stat.”

“Yes, sir.” Lang stood up and jogged out of the room.

Fury stepped back into his office, shut the door, and pulled up the live feed and updates about Captain America’s status. The man was in a medically induced coma, vitals stable.

On another screen, Fury saw the live window from Widow watch, the task force he’d assembled to try and keep track of the Widow every time she went off-grid between ops. They were only nominally successful. The last word of her had been a reported sighting in Chita in southeast Russia, and that had been thirty-one hours ago. She could be anywhere by now, if it had even been Romanoff - the report was unconfirmed.

And Barton was acting odd. Fury tapped his fingers pensively on the desk, examining the file with the latest psych analysis of the agent known as Hawkeye. Barton had been withdrawn, less talkative than previous years, and more close-lipped, particularly when asked questions about the Widow. There was nothing concrete, nothing certain, but Fury had years of experience managing his agents, and there was a niggling suspicion that Barton had been compromised in a permanent way.

The clock on Widow watch switched from thirty-one to thirty-two hours since the last suspected
Fury moved decisively, taking three sharp strides across the room and snatching his phone from the floor. He flipped through his contacts and made a call.

“This is Director Fury. Authorization Delta nine zero Omega black.” He paused. “It’s time to wake the Captain.”

“Darcy, I am fine.”

“You are not fine. You haven’t left your lab in four days - what, I take take a promo and suddenly you turn into a freaking zombie? Have you even slept?”

“Yes!”

“When?”

“Ah…”

“Exactly. Don’t make me regret switching to PR.”

Jane didn’t answer.

Darcy rolled her eyes, walked over to Jane’s desk, and closed her laptop.

“Darcy!”

The brunette sniffed. “You’re ridiculous. Okay? This is exactly why I didn’t want to accept Stark’s promotion. Come on. You’re going to eat and put on lady clothes and we’re going out.”

“Don’t you dare turn down that promotion, I know you missed your weird soft science stuff. Also, the last time you tried to get me to go out, Thor showed up and dumped me!”

“So maybe this time he’ll come back and say you were right and he’s defied his daddy,” Darcy said agreeably. “We’re going.”

“No.” Jane turned away and started going through papers.

Darcy hopped up onto the counter and dramatically flopped down across Jane’s piles of papers.

Jane threw up her hands. “Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously,” Darcy said. “You’re done. You need food and—” She sniffed and made a face. “Dude, when was the last time you showered?”

Jane looked away.

Darcy sat up and felt her face pinching slightly with worry. In front of most people, she would’ve hidden it behind her joking, irreverent mask, but not Jane. Not her best friend.

“Fine,” Jane sighed. “But we’re not going out.”

“Deal,” Darcy said. She was a poly-sci major; she knew how to take a compromise. “Though it is a shame to waste this sexiness on a couch, I will concede to a movie night. With lots of ice cream. We will watch terrible horror flicks and eat sweet things.”
Jane heaved a sigh and started powering down the computers and machines. Darcy hid her relief; she’d been getting worried about Jane. The scientist tended to cope with any sort of emotional turmoil in her life by throwing herself into her work with a fanatic and, honestly, kind of scary focus.

Jane stopped at the door when she realized Darcy wasn’t following. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to clean up a bit,” Darcy said. “Your new interns are clearly nowhere near my genius. And if you think I’m going to share my twenty-dollar fuzzy blankets with you until you’ve showered, you are dead wrong. Come to my place in forty minutes. Bring popcorn, I ran out last week.”

Jane heaved a sigh, but she must have decided it wasn’t worth arguing, so she went on her way.

As soon as the doors hissed shut, Darcy kicked off from the desk and spun wildly across the room, whooping as she went. She’d have to thank Stark for the soundproof lab. And the spinny chairs. This thing was like suitable for a starship captain.

Hey. That could be fun.

“All hands on deck!” Darcy shouted, sweeping a hand across the table. “Land ho!” Papers flew up into the air, and she shoved the chair again, grabbing them as she went. Her old organizational system from before the days of working in Stark’s PR department - a promotion that had come her way just two weeks before - came back to her easily, and she started sorting Jane’s scattered messes with ease into piles near their respective instruments.

Spiky Box of Doom readings, definitely, none of the other graphs have so many colors... This is probably related to the Icy Death Tornado in Canada last year, I know that address, where was the rest of that data? Oh yeah, blue filing cabinet... Shit, the idiots moved her papers on anomalies... And this is that weird formula thing she cracked last year... for tracking energy anomaly things...

Wait.

Darcy looked back over the papers and frowned. While many of the interns and scientists at Stark dismissed her as a silly, ditzy assistant that Jane had hired out of pity, she knew exactly how intelligent she was, and that she’d picked up on plenty during a year and a half as Jane’s official employee. This data was definitely out of her field, but she could tell (vaguely) that there was a veeerrrrry interesting energy thing happening out in the desert of the southwest.

Darcy cracked her knuckles, flicked open her Mac, and opened Google Maps.

Twenty minutes and a ridiculous amount of coding later, she had a few pieces of the puzzle. Hacking was only a hobby for Darcy, and she didn’t know enough to put together everything, but honestly she was just proud that she’d managed to sneak past any of SHIELD’s firewalls. Was that because Stark was already spying on SHIELD and she was in his network? Absolutely. Darcy was not too proud to accept help.

Because that’s what she had found. SHIELD had a base out in the desert. And they were pumping a crapton of moolah into that little hidey-hole, not to mention the hack job she found lurking on Google’s servers, writing over the satellite pics of the area. Darcy had only gotten blurry photos, but they told a damming story: SHIELD base, high energy readings, lots of funding, lots of personnel.

What are you cooking out there?

Darcy slipped into the SHIELD network and changed its log of her IP address, tore through Stark Industries’ network and erased any record there of her hack, and wiped her laptop clean of any trace.
She’d been subtle, and only skimmed the surface of their network. Probably no one would even notice she’d been there, and if they did, well - corporations and government agencies deflected low-level hack jobs every day. Hopefully it would read as just a Stark janitor getting bored and dickering around on a computer and stumbling into something he shouldn’t.

Humming, Darcy carried her laptop out of the room and headed for the elevator. It was movie night. She’d sort all this out tomorrow. As the junior PR liaison, she had enough access to Stark’s oh-so-valuable time to bring it up, once she figured out what she was going to say.
Returning to the Field

Washington, D.C., United States

April 2011

His fists were raw and aching.

Gunfire rattled. Men fell around him. Bullets pinging off the shield.

Burning lungs, racing heart.

“I’ve got to put her in the water!”

Sore feet, gritted teeth.

An impact that seemed to shake the world down.

His knuckles slammed through the punching bag. Sand exploded across the dimly-lit gymnasium, and the chain snapped, landing it on the floor.

Steve Rogers sighed, counted to ten and focused on the physical world and sensations, the way the oh-so-brilliant twenty-first century therapists had told him. It took a few seconds, but once he had himself under a tenuous control, he reached for the next punching bag in a pile of them.

“Can’t sleep?”

In a millisecond, he processed the familiar voice and controlled his body’s natural screaming attack now danger danger reflex, the souvenir of having lived in a war zone, and turned it into a simple turn. “Sir,” he said, his army training eliciting the respectful greeting. “Not well, no. Too many memories.”

“Steve-”

“We need you.”

Steve resisted the urge to drop his shoulders. A mission would be excellent. He’d be able to get back to what he was good at, fighting to protect freedom and justice, and he could do some independent evaluation of this organization. He trusted Fury and what he’d seen so far of SHIELD, as much as he trusted anyone.

“Finally going to tell me what’s going on?” he said, unable to hide the bitterness.

Fury blinked. Score one for me. “What makes you think there’s something going on?”

“I’m not a dunce,” Steve said coldly, beginning to unwrap the cotton from his knuckles. “You thawed me out in four days, but I know how much debate there was in SHIELD about whether to wake me up at all. If it was worth the risk of me coming back unstable, damaged, or wanting revenge. Something made you decide the risk was worth it.”

The director’s face was unrepentant. “We had no way of knowing what your reaction would be. Captain America is a formidable enemy.”

Steve resisted the urge to say that’s not who I am anymore. He was unsure about a lot of things in
this strange modern world he’d woken up to, but he knew one thing for sure: the shield and the man remained, but Captain America was gone.

He’d be Steve Rogers now, or no one at all.

If only he knew who that was.

“I understand, sir.”

“Here.” Fury pulled a folder from inside his jacket and handed it over.

Steve dropped the last of his wraps into his bag, zipped it up, and took the folder. Inside were papers, detailing scientific readings and theories he didn’t understand, but he didn’t have to. He stared at the picture on top of the stack.

“Howard Stark fished it out of the Atlantic looking for you,” Fury said. Steve could feel how closely the other man was watching him, that one dark eye burning into his blond hair. “We’ve been studying it. There’s enough energy in that thing to power the entire world. Unlimited energy, if only we could tap it. But there’s been a situation.”

“Let me guess,” Steve sighed. “Someone took it, or tried to.”

“Got it in one.” Fury’s expression, when Steve looked up, was as lined as if he held the weight of the world on his shoulders. Steve felt an odd moment of kinship with this man, this soldier, fighting for the same dream Steve still clutched close in his heart. Freedom. Safety.

The difference was that Fury didn’t care who got in his way.

“It’s gone missing,” Fury continued. “Taken by an unknown foreign entity, surmised to be from Asgard - you remember the briefing on the Puente Antiguo incident?”

“Vividly,” Steve said drily. It was hard to forget the footage of a seemingly invincible metal monster and five armed warriors with brilliant weapons, far stronger than ordinary humans.

Fury’s lips twitched. “Yes, I thought you might. The working theory is that our thief is of Asgard, simply because it’s highly unlikely that there’s another alien race out there that looks more or less identical to humans. SHIELD is mobilizing. The world needs you again, Cap.”

Steve examined his new commanding officer. “But that’s not the reason you woke me up, is it?”

Fury raised his eyebrow.

“This says the Tesseract was stolen two days ago,” Steve said, tapping the folder and fighting the images that swam in his head. He was already on edge from his flashback of a few minutes ago, and it was all too easy to remember the sinister blue light that permeated the ship and lit his battle with the Red Skull in that cruel glow. “You had me pulled out of that coma six weeks ago. What else is going on?”

Steve wasn’t the best at reading people’s faces, but he was no amateur, either, and he definitely picked up on a trace of irritation before Fury tucked it away. “Soldier-”

“Don’t give me that,” Steve interrupted.

Fury glowered. “Fine. If you must know, there was a… situation with another of our agents. The Black Widow.”
Steve thought back; his memory was nearly perfect, but what came to mind made him frown. “That file was almost empty.”

“That’s because she’s one of our most clandestine operatives. Not to mention her past isn’t something she’s particularly inclined to share,” Fury said. “All information we have on the Widow is kept strictly confidential. Meaning no one sees it but me, Coulson, and Hill.”

“Sir, such compartmentalization will limit my effectiveness,” Steve said, trying to stay calm. He hated when COs withheld information, tried to sideline him and box him in. He was a super soldier, for crying out loud.

“Which is exactly why I’m about to fill you in,” Fury snapped.

Steve glanced around.

Fury waved a hand. “Don’t worry, this place is clean. I had it swept weeks ago and it’s under constant surveillance. Don’t give me that look. Of course I’m keeping tabs on the gym one of our most valuable agents uses.”

“I’m flattered. Tell me about the Widow.” Her name had been blacked out of the forms.

“A woman by the name of Natasha Romanoff,” Fury said. Steve noticed that the man’s voice dropped several levels despite his surety that there were no listening ears. “She was born in 1921, as best we can tell, and went into a Russian experimental espionage program known only as the Red Room. She was their best student, their prize and greatest accomplishment, and a massive pain in the ass for SHIELD for decades.

“Sometime in the nineties, she defected and played contract killer for a few years. Then in 2001, she had a run-in with Agent Barton. Hawkeye.” Steve remembered that file, too; he’d been impressed, and still wanted to meet the man. “He’d been sent to kill her, and made a different call.”

Steve definitely wanted to meet this man. There weren’t many soldiers - call them Agents, that’s what these people really were - who’d have the guts and confidence to defy orders in such a major way.

“She came in with him, and we spent two years picking apart the psychological triggers and brainwashing of the KGB. She’s been one of my best agents for almost a decade now, and as such, she gets a little latitude in between assignments. She went off the grid two months ago. We lost her about a week in, and since then, it’s like trying to track a ghost. I got worried. And here we are.”

Fury made it seem like he’d given a lot of confidential details, but Steve noticed several gaping holes in the story. He ignored them, saying only, “Are you pulling together the Avengers Initiative over one woman?”

“One woman? No,” Fury said. “In fact, she was originally considered for the team. That may or may not be an option. Depends on her story when she resurfaces.” Something in the man’s scowl made Steve decide to shore up the drop package he’d hidden in case he ever had to run. Fury obviously had no qualms eliminating agents who had become liabilities. It was equal parts impressive and chilling. “But given the theft of the Tesseract, yes. Barton is pulling in Dr. Banner as we speak, and Coulson is speaking to Stark.”

Steve grimaced. He did not like what he knew of the billionaire.

“I know, he’s not your type,” Fury said. “I expect you to suck it up and work with him. He brings unique resources and abilities to the team, and trust me, he’s been carefully vetted. Might not seem like it, but he’ll do what it takes to protect this world.”
“Hmmm,” Steve said noncommittally, and slung his bag over his shoulder. “I’ll be at headquarters in the morning, sir.”

“Is there anything useful you can tell us about the Tesseract?” Fury called as Steve walked for the exit.

The blond man didn’t pause or look back as he spoke in a hard voice. “You should’ve left it in the ocean.”

Fury didn’t reply, and Steve kept right on walking.
Recruitment

Calcutta, India

April, 2011

The only thought in Clint’s head was that if Banner was looking for a low-stress environment, he’d come to the wrong place. Calcutta was a screeching, chaotic mess of loud children, shitty cars, road rage, crazy druggies, and back-alley brawls. At least in this region.

He followed the child through the streets, confident in his disguise. She had no idea he was there as she dodged motor scooters, shrieking vendors, and grabbing hands with the ease of lifelong practice. Clint paused long enough to deck one sleazeball who grabbed at the poor kid’s bottom; he was sure he took out a few of the guy’s teeth and definitely broke his nose. The SHIELD agent almost lost track of his target, but it was so worth it.

Why the blessed hell did Banner pick this city of all places?

At last, the little girl cut away from the street and slipped through a door. Clint eyed the building unhappily before he set off down the alley to its left; it looked rickety and unstable.

The alley was worse than the street. There were three people passed out in varying stages of drug- or alcohol-induced lethargy on the ground amid rancid puddles and piles of garbage. Clint breathed through his nose, shot a grappler arrow into the shadowed eaves of the roof three stories above, and used the motor on the harness built into his suit to pull him up the side of the building.

He first spotted Barton through a second-story window.

The man was bent over four adults on pallets on the floor; curly, sweat-soaked dark hair was the only visible part of him. Three of the interior walls had been knocked out, turning the whole story into one big space. Eight more pallets were unoccupied, though Clint noted that three of those had signs of recent use; he’d have to be careful their occupants wouldn’t get in his way when he eventually confronted Banner. The walls were lined with shelves stuffed with various medical supplies probably purchased as outlet surplus; Clint could also see IV stands, two bathrooms, and an industrial-sized fridge-freezer set that had definitely seen better days.

Guess SHIELD was right; the guy’s running a makeshift hospital.

The little girl walked in seconds after Clint took up his post outside the window. He pulled a mike from his pocket, held it to the window, and listened.

She pleaded with Banner in a combination of Hindi and heavily accented English; Clint didn’t know the language, but he got the gist: the little girl’s father was here at the clinic, and her mother couldn’t scrape enough together to pay the doctor.

Banner calmed the girl after thirty seconds of her high-pitched and exhausted explanation, gave her a glass of water and a pack of fruit snacks, and said something along the lines of pay me later (it was a longer sentence with Hindi words thrown in, so Clint couldn’t be sure) and then said something that made the SHIELD agent’s ears practically perk up.

“I live upstairs,” he said slowly, pointing at the ceiling, and showed the kid a rope hanging along the wall. Clint squinted into the shadows of the far side of the room; sure enough, it seemed to go up through the ceiling. Some kind of bell-pull.
Banner showed the kid how to tug the rope, gave her another pack of fruit snacks, and sent her home. The way he watched her go, worry and affection showing on his face, told Clint a lot about the man.

Then the doctor’s posture changed.

In the span of a heartbeat, he tensed, head snapping up and eyes focusing. All softness vanished from his face, and he started to turn to the window-

Clint jerked away, pressing himself flat to the wall, barely breathing.

There had been something incongruous about Banner’s expression in that second. Clint trusted his gut, and right now, it was telling him two things: one, that he was no longer the only predator on the scene, and two, whoever had just been looking out of Banner’s eyes was not the same person as the one who’d given fruit snacks to a little girl and told her there was no rush on the payment.

Also, Clint was fairly sure that Banner’s eyes had changed color to a livid, radioactive green.

As if he didn’t already have enough weirdness in his life.

After three long minutes, he moved again - slowly, slowly, making no sound. Feet braced on the wall to keep him from swinging, he put tactical glasses over his eyes, deactivated the Night Vision they were set to, and pulled a periscope from his pocket.

It wasn’t a proper periscope, more like a button camera on a stick if he was being honest, but that was the name the little device had gotten in the agents’ cafeteria, and it stuck, much to the consternation of the scientists. Clint had told one of them to stop using nine-syllable names that were eighty percent technical jargon if they wanted their own names to stick. SHEILD’s R&D people still hadn’t forgiven him that one.

He carefully shaped the flexible periscope stalk and hit the button with his thumb. A slightly grainy image that was at least in color appeared on the inside of the glasses. Clint slowly maneuvered the device until it was just barely peeking around the top corner of the window frame.

Only years of SHIELD training and operations kept him from twitching. Banner was standing right there, less than two feet from the window, head turned slightly away. Clint suspected that only that small angle had kept Banner’s eyes from picking up on the movement of the tiny camera.

The man’s head turned slowly back toward the window. Clint held his breath when he noticed that fading neon green still flickered in Banner’s normally dark-brown irises.

At last the tension eased, the bright color faded, and Banner turned back to his patients.

Clint waited until one of the men was crying out in agony before he activated the winch on his harness; the faint whirring it made would be covered by the man’s noise. It lifted him quickly and easily up the side of the building until he could swing carefully over to a third-floor window. Clint disintegrated the glass with a Stark ionizer charge, tucked the spent black device back into his pocket, and climbed feetfirst through the window.

The apartment was small, dark, and cluttered. Clint was surprised by the things possessed by the man, considering he seemed ready to up and run at any minute; three minutes’ searching found four go bags and several guns stashed in easy reach in the room. Each of the bags had cash, clothes, and passports. Clint was mildly impressed. He’d met SHIELD agents with set-ups that were pathetic compared to this.
Mostly the things Banner had everywhere were books. Used, battered physics and biology textbooks shared space with stuff from the 1600s and spy thrillers of the last decade.

Clint at last settled in the kitchen, placing a table between himself and the door. There was a pistol taped to the underside of said table. He spun it so the gun was on his own side rather than the one that would be facing Banner when he came in, readied his bow, and waited.

It was forty-one minutes before weary footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Banner walked into the apartment. Clint heard him rummaging about in his front hall, probably trying not to trip over books, then in the shabby living space.

Then the sound of his movements came down the hall toward the kitchen.

_Calcutta, India_

_April 2011_

Bruce was having a bad day.

Three new patients were in with some mutated form of the flu; his rent was due and he was going to have a hard time making the payment this month; there were those three people who’d been asking questions about him at the market for almost a month and then mysteriously disappeared a week ago; and now this pervasive feeling of being watched. It had cropped up a few days ago and he’d seen nothing concrete, but the other guy’s instincts were rarely wrong, and Bruce could feel him growling and peering about restlessly.

He hoped he wouldn’t have to move again. He liked this little hospital he’d built. He was doing good, helping people-

Then he stepped into his kitchen and registered the man sitting at his table.

Bruce stopped dead in his tracks.

“Evening, Dr. Banner,” the man said. American, with that trained relaxation that only came from mastery of very specific skill set. Despite that, he seemed… goofy. Affable. Not the usual type Bruce met in these situations.

It was a mark of how upended his life had become that Bruce even _had_ a baseline for strange armed men breaking into his apartment and very possibly preparing to threaten him for one reason or another.

“Who are you?” Bruce said warily, moving a few steps closer to the table. If he could reach the gun underneath it…

“Agent Clint Barton with SHIELD,” the man said, and Bruce stopped and sighed.

“SHIELD. Of course.” He worried at one shirt-cuff. “How’d they find me?”

“Didn’t have to,” Barton said. His left hand was out of sight beneath the table. Bruce would bet money there was a weapon in it. And - was that a quiver on his back? “We’ve been tracking you from a distance. Not your exact location, just - general area. We’ve stayed away. Even chased off some other nasties who were sniffing you down.”
Bruce didn’t want to show his interest, but he couldn’t help it. “Ross?”

“Among others.”

“Why?” Bruce asked.

Barton shrugged. “Wasn’t my call. At a guess, it’s because Fury trusts you.” Bruce couldn’t figure out what Barton thought of that assessment. “But now he needs your help.”

“Bet that was fun to admit,” Bruce muttered.

Barton smirked and leaned forward in the chair. “Just between us, when he got to that part of the briefing, I could’ve sworn there was a lemon in his mouth.”

“Just between us?” Bruce asked, raising an eyebrow. “So this place isn’t surrounded right now?”

“We’re in the middle of a city,” Barton said dryly. “I’m hoping you’re not going to… you know. Kinda my top priority, actually. And I can handle human you. So yeah.” He held up one empty hand. “Just you and me.”

“You, me, and whatever weapon is in your other hand,” Bruce pointed out.

Barton’s lips twitched, and he finally moved. Bruce tensed, but all the agent did was lay a complicated compound bow on the table.

“Why me?” Bruce asked when Barton didn’t seem inclined to speak more.

“You’re the world’s leading expert on gamma rays,” Barton said quietly. “And we need to track something that’s emitting them. That’s all I can say right now.”

“And… if I say no?” Bruce asked. He had to.

Barton tapped his bow. “I’ll persuade you.”

“That might end poorly. For a lot of people.”

“And you care. Don’t you?” Barton said, but it wasn’t really a question. “You care about people getting hurt. So you can say no, in which case I walk away, because I definitely don’t want to meet your lovely lime green alter ego, and I don’t want to introduce him to Calcutta, either. But if you walk, and we don’t find this thing we need…” His face darkened. “Let’s just say it will be worse. For a lot of people. Like, the whole world.”

“The whole world,” Bruce repeated. “You’re trying to save the world, and you’re calling in me, of all people?”

Barton nodded. “Take it or leave it. But if you leave it, and we fail…” he let the sentence trail off.

Bruce heard the unspoken words. It’s on you.

“I love coercion,” he muttered, and reached under the table.

His fingers came up empty.

“Looking for this?”

Bruce’s gun was dangling from Barton’s fingers.
He held up his hands. "I mean no harm."

Barton looked skeptical but let it slide, stuffing the weapon into his waistband. "Look, Doctor, I know you’ve got three more of those hidden around this place. I know you don’t want to make any building pancake tonight, and I’m guessing you also don’t want to keep hiding in Calcutta while the world goes to shit. So are you gonna stay here and keep treating flu patients, or come with me and save thousands of lives?"

Bruce paused, unwilling to give up his answer so easily, but the truth was, from the minute they’d met in this dingy little kitchen, there was only one way this was going to end.

“I’m coming.”
First Contact

[Classified Location] , SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

Natasha greeted Clint and Banner as they got off the jet with no small measure of relief.

It didn’t show on her face, but since Coulson had tracked her down in Russia, she’d been worried about Clint’s tangle with the mind-warping leather-bound man from outer space. Natasha had seen the footage, seen Clint dodge that scepter and get whacked into a wall for his trouble, seen Coulson almost die getting her friend out while Fury chased the compromised Hill, Selvig, and the alien out of the base. Seconds before it imploded.

It had been the first time in years that anything trumped her burning vengeance, which frankly pissed Natasha off a little bit. She’d come to care too much for Clint, and, if she was being honest, for Stark and Pepper. He was an obnoxious jerk and she was a control freak, but Natasha had somehow found common ground with Stark over his PTSD and bitterness, and she made an effort with Pepper for the sake of the narcissistic billionaire. It had turned out better than she’d expected.

Although she didn’t consider Pepper a friend, exactly. And she wasn’t sure what Stark was to her. They weren’t even on a first-name basis, which, according to Clint, was a thing friends did.

“Welcome to the party,” she called over the wind.

“Thanks,” the doctor said warily. She’d done a threat evaluation the second he came into view, and was not particularly impressed; the man looked nervous, unsure of himself, and also like he had an impossibly tight mental control. His heartbeat, when he got close enough for her to see his pulse point on his neck, was steadier than almost anyone she’d ever met. He had little to no combat training and his shyness was almost endearing.

“Hey, partner,” Clint said.

She gave him a nod. “You are not injured?”

“Hardly the most strenuous operation Fury’s ever given me.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I wasn’t talking about the retrieval.”

“I’m fine, Tasha.”

Banner made a little choking noise. Both agents turned to look at him.

“Tasha?”

“Have we met?” Natasha asked coldly, body tensing. Clint picked up on the cue and she felt him focus, shifting almost imperceptibly away from Banner.

“No, no,” the doctor said hurriedly. “I- it was in the files. That Fury sent for my debrief on the flight. You just… didn’t seem like a nickname - sort of person.”

He was blushing now.

“Ah,” Natasha said.
A siren wailed across the deck.

She glanced over the edge at the whitecaps lashing the sides of the helicarrier. “I suggest you get inside,” she shouted over her shoulder. “It’s about to get a little hard to breathe.”

The doctor’s eyebrows shot up. “Really. They want me in a pressurized metal can. Underwater.”

Natasha smirked and gestured over the side.

Banner approached the railing.

With a roar, the turbines started up, slowly unfolding from under the sea. Water poured from the sides of the helicarrier as the turbines gained speed and it began to lift up into the air.

“Oh, no, this is much worse,” Banner shouted.

Natasha gestured over her shoulder and led them across the deck.

“Dr. Banner. Glad you could join us,” Lang said. Natasha resisted the urge to glare at him - she disliked him, and the feeling was mutual.

She stepped aside and let Banner go ahead of her in the command hub, watching the way Fury, Stark, and even Clint automatically watched him. She remained in the shadows, just as she liked it.

Except - the Captain.

Natasha checked herself as she felt the tall blond man’s eyes settle on her, ignoring Banner.

She dipped her head to the Captain with an ironic tilt to her mouth. She didn’t expect that they’d get along well, but at the very least, here was another soldier. He’d immediately identified her as the primary threat in this room.

Natasha made a point of examining him and then turning away as if he were beneath her, testing him. No trace of annoyance flitted across his posture. Not arrogant, then, or vain - he didn’t mind that she’d apparently dismissed him. Interesting.

“When did you become an expert in thermonuclear astrophysics?” Clint asked, glaring at Stark.

Natasha took a seat close to Clint, ready to referee if she had to. He and Stark rarely occupied the same room without butting heads.

Sure enough, Stark lifted his chin and gave Clint a challenging look. “Last night.”

Clint opened his mouth.

“Fight later, girls,” Natasha interrupted.

Her partner, at least, got the message, and flopped into a chair next to Natasha.

“Settle down,” Fury grumbled, turning away from his command platform and its three sides of screens. “Banner. Welcome to the party.”

“Thanks,” Banner said, glancing around with a combination of nervousness and curiosity. “I think.”
“You’ll be working with our good friend Mr Stark here,” Fury continued, gesturing at the billionaire. “I trust you read the briefing?”

“All caught up,” Banner said.

Stark glanced at Natasha, a question in his eyes. She nodded.

The billionaire turned away, a magnanimous smile on his face. “Well! I think we are going to get along fabulously, Doctor. Your work is unparalleled. And can I just say - I am a huge fan of the way you lose control and turn turn into an enormous green rage monster.”

Something flickered in Banner’s eyes. “Uh, thanks.”

Stark led the gamma ray specialist out of the room, speculating about the best way to track the gamma radiation emitted by the Tesseract. Natasha watched them go with consternation. Her loyalty was to SHIELD now, and as fond as she might be of Tony Stark, he had a penchant for breaking rules.

The Captain’s attention still flickered over her skin.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier
April 2011

There was something going on here that Tony didn’t like.

He carefully maintained his public persona of irreverent playboy, but behind his awesome facial hair and the smirk that made men and women alike fall over themselves, he was always calculating. Naivete did not survive long in the business world, and Tony was CEO of one of the most successful tech corporations in the world. One of his cynical moments had resulted in him telling Pepper that he had “too much bitterness and not enough faith” to expect good from anyone.

So when it turned out that Nick Fury had had this top-secret program running for months at the very least, and probably longer, Tony’s suspicious nerves all pricked right up.

But he didn’t know Banner well enough yet to ask. The man might well go squealing right to Fury. Tony held his tongue.

“Welcome to my playground,” Tony said, grinning and throwing his arms wide.

“Welcome back, sir.”

“Hey, JARVIS! Settled in?”

“I am an artificial intelligence, sir. There is nothing for me to settle into.”

“That’s a yes ,” Tony said to Banner. “This lab is state-of-the-art, Doc. Not quite as many toys as I’ve got back at my tower. Fury gave me a weight limit, and my portable gravity reducer still has a forty percent explosion rate, so the man wouldn’t bring it on the ship.”

Banner was staring at him as if he’d grown an extra eye. Tony resisted the urge to find a mirror. It frankly wouldn’t be the weirdest thing that had ever happened to him.
Maybe he needed to reevaluate his life choices.

The doctor must have decided to ignore this as meaningless blather and turned to the nearest screen. “So, ah… How do I…” Banner gestured at the transparent glass, nonplussed.

“Ah. So this is the interface I designed personally two years ago - gah, Fury’s still running the 3.8 platform. I’m on to 4.3 at the tower - you log in here, see, it’s a biometric scanner, reads your DNA and vitals and thumbprint, won’t let you in if someone’s holding you at gunpoint, for example, your pulse skyrockets and weird hormones get in your bloodstream - and then you navigate over here - no, that bar - seriously, where have you been for the last few years?”

Banner raised an eyebrow. “Helping people.”

“Good to see you’ve got a spine in there somewhere,” Tony said, undeterred by the thinly veiled implications in the doctor’s statement. He’d heard worse. “Where exactly was that? World Vision? Doctors without Borders?”

“Private clinic in Calcutta,” Banner admitted after a minute, during which (surprise) he managed to pull up spectrometer readings on his own. “I was… removing myself from stressful situations.”

“Calcutta. Yes, that’s absolutely the first place my mind goes when someone says stress-free environment,” Tony drawled.

Banner ignored him and kept working.

The man might have been out of touch with the technology, but within half an hour, Tony had decided that the packet on him had far from overestimated the man. In fact, it had probably underestimated him, if anything. There was a keen intelligence in there, and unless Tony was mistaken - which he very rarely was about people - there was an edge of… cynicism, bitterness, anger, something underneath the dorky, diffident exterior. Banner had an unusual amount of control, but Tony had an unusual amount of intuition. Plus there was JARVIS talking into his earpiece with an occasional analysis of the doctor’s little facial tics, since Tony couldn’t stare at him; there was work to be done.

A lot more than just tracking the cube.

Tony ignored the… unpleasant… patriarchal memories dredged up by too much focus on the Tesseract and dove into the code. He was working programs and tech while Banner handled the gamma signatures and told him what he needed the equipment to do, a partnership that worked surprisingly well but gave Tony rather too much free time for his own good. There was a reason Fury had called Banner in on this instead of just using his consultant. Tony was not too proud to admit that this was Banner’s field of expertise.

Although Tony might well be caught up in a few more days of it.

In the meantime, though, Tony was quite happy to use the snatches of down time to start probing SHIELD’s network. A brute-force hack run by JARVIS would be faster but the firewalls would probably notify one of Fury’s minions. And this job called for discretion.

Tony could practically hear Pepper teasing him, asking if he could use discretion.

I can be perfectly discreet, he would tell her. I just usually choose not to.

He missed her.
It was a startling and somewhat unpleasant realization. Tony had grown into the belief that caring for other people only gave them the opportunity to hurt you. It was akin to handing someone a knife and turning your back, waiting to see if they would use it or not, only you stayed like that for years.

Better to just not care.

But Pepper was there, in his heart, and Tony wished she could be here on the helicarrier with him. His ballast and his brake system.

“This is… astrophysics,” Banner said abruptly, looking up at Tony.

“So?”

“So it’s not my field or yours,” Banner said, and started to turn his screen.

“No, no, just - there, use that tab in the top right that says SS, then screen 4 - yes, good.” Tony examined the data that popped up on his own console when Bruce shared his screen. “Where’d you find this?”

“In the data from the day the portal opened in New Mexico,” Banner said. “I was looking through it to separate the gamma rays out from the other background radiation and other readings, get a baseline to see what changes happen during portals versus when it’s more or less stable. I got the gamma signature, but…” He gestured at the screen. “This isn’t anything I ever learned.”

“Even I can’t quite master astrophysics in one night,” Tony admitted. “Might take me a week of no sleep.”

Banner stared. “You can do that?”

“With enough caffeine? Easily. No caffeine? I’ll be hallucinating by the end of it, but hey, I’ve gotten some of my best ideas while majorly sleep-deprived. I wrote a third of JARVIS’ code on six days of no sleep.”

“I believe that there are several latent programming errors in that section of code, sir,” JARVIS cut in.

“Whose side are you on?” Tony asked. “Anyway. JARVIS, tell Fury to get Jane Foster up here, and message her on STARKnet that she can bring - what’s her name, Delilah?”

“Darcy Lewis, sir.”

“Right, her. Might be useful to have a PR person up here anyway and she’s used to keeping Jane’s secrets. Banner’s right. This is characteristic of an Einstein-Rosen bridge.”

“Foster is the scientist who was there at Puente Antiguo,” Banner said, understanding.

Tony nodded. “And she was dating that blond space muscle dude until he listened to Daddy dearest and dumped her last year, so don’t bring it up if you don’t have to. His Royal Highness Odin sounds like a major pain in the ass.”

“Problems with your father?” Banner asked shrewdly.

Tony pointed at the shorter man. “Don’t psychoanalyze me, it’ll give you a migraine. JARVIS-”

“Sir, Director Fury has just sent you a message,” JARVIS said. “The man who stole the Tesseract has shown up in Stuttgart. The Quinjet with Agent Romanoff, Agent Barton, and the Captain is
taking off as I speak."

Tony sighed gustily. “JARVIS, get the Mark 1.8 operational. I’ll catch up in the air.”

“Sir, I don’t believe Fury intended you to go-”

“You can handle this, right?” Tony asked Banner. “Say yes.”

Banner nodded.

“See, JARVIS? It’s fine. I’ll save the Captain’s star-spangled ass and everything will be fine. Get the suit ready.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Later,” Tony told Banner, and left the lab.
Steve waited silently in the back of the jet, watching Barton and Romanoff. There was an easy camaraderie between them that reminded him of another time, another man, another mission.

Steve shoved the grief aside and focused on his analyses of them. There wasn’t anything better to do on the flight.

Barton was the pilot, strapped in and speaking only occasionally when another aircraft hailed him on the radio. Steve didn’t understand the complex controls yet, but Barton seemed to have an easy mastery of the plane, and of himself. The man was very clearly a fighter and a good one. His environmental awareness was excellent; he’d evaluated Steve at a glance the second they’d met and there was a quiet confidence and amiability that clearly let him get along well with everyone. The exception was Stark, but that hardly surprised Steve. He’d known Howard well. Being an obnoxious jerkface was an integral part of Stark DNA.

The woman was a different story.

Natasha Romanoff. Steve had watched her from the second she led Banner and Barton into the command room. She was an enigma: she gave nothing away and was the most self-contained person he’d ever met. Every movement was choreographed; every word was premeditated. She was an exceedingly dangerous individual. Steve’s judgment on her was reserved. He got the sense that she would be a powerful ally, but that she would be an equally terrifying enemy. Based on her report, he doubted whether even he could beat her if it came down to a straight fight.

Yet he was drawn to her. Not in a romantic way, just - the sense that he got with people sometimes. There was something similar about them. He wanted to be on her side.

“Got it on autopilot,” Barton announced a few minutes later. “I’m gonna check over my suit.” He stood, left his headset on the seat, and headed for the weapons locker in the back of the jet, nodding at Steve as he passed. “We’ll be in Stuttgart in ten minutes, so lock and load if you’ve got to.”

“Thanks,” Steve said, and Barton disappeared into the locker.

Now or never. Subtlety was never Steve’s strong suit. He stood and approached Romanoff.

“Steve Rogers,” he said, and held out a hand. “I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced.”

Her inscrutable eyes met his for a moment, and then her lips quirked and she took his hand. “Been a long time since I’ve heard anyone talk like that.”

Steve shrugged and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “They call me the man out of time.”

“Applies to both of us.”

“We anachronisms ought to stick together, then,” Steve said.

Romanoff’s eyes sharpened. “An offer of alliance, then?”

He tipped his head to the side. “I wasn’t going to be so blunt about it.”
“Yes, you were,” she said, and her smirk grew into an actual smile. It was full and amused with a distinct edge of cruelty, but Steve was familiar enough with his own dark side to not be scared off by anyone else’s.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “I was.”

“Allies, then,” Romanoff said.

Barton stepped out of the locker. “Tasha, look, this quiver-” He paused when he took in the changed atmosphere of the cabin. A guarded look came over his face despite the agent’s light tone. “Am I interrupting something?”

“We have a new ally,” Romanoff said solemnly, a hint of a smile still on her face.

Barton looked to Romanoff, who communicated back silently. The exchange happened in a heartbeat but Steve caught it easily, and almost flinched, remembering when he’d had that kind of a bond with someone else. It could only be formed in blood and under fire, by fighting for your lives until we came more easily to the mind than I.

He shoved the memories away. That time was gone, and even a supersoldier couldn’t reverse death.

“Welcome aboard,” Barton said, nodding briskly to Steve and dropping back into the pilot’s seat. “Not the most functional group you’ll have ever met but - oh, hold that thought. What in the hell is that guy wearing?”

Through the dash, the three could see at least two hundred people kneeling in the square in the center of Stuttgart, surrounded by glowing body-doubles of an unusually tall man in green-and-black leather armor and a gold horned helm. Thanks to the two other helicopters in the sky, he had taken no notice yet of the Quinjet.

Steve sighed, pulled his helmet on, and buckled the chin-strap. “Honestly? The last maniac I fought in this country looked even weirder.”

“They just don’t make villains like they used to these days,” Barton said with a theatrical sigh, and opened the rear bay door. “Cap, you’re up.”

Steve looked at Romanoff. “You coming?”

“Code black agent,” she said quietly. “Minimal exposure. There’s dozens of cameras down there. I’m only coming in as a very, very last resort.”

“That’s reassuring,” Steve said, and jumped out of the plane.

Stuttgart, Germany

April 2011

Tony didn’t want to admit exactly how much vindictive pleasure he got out of seeing that holier-than-thou Captain getting tossed around like a tennis shoe. He didn’t pause in his flight to the rescue, though. That would have been poor sportsmanship.

“Hey, Romanoff, Barton. Miss me?”

He could practically hear the two agents rolling their eyes, although it was probably drowned out by
the music blasting from the jet’s PA systems, both internal and external. Tony blasted the alien away from the battered Captain and aimed every weapon in his arsenal at the dude’s unfairly attractive face. “Make a move, reindeer games.”

A pause. The metal armor bits and the helmet vanished, and the alien raised his hands.

“Good move.”

“Stark,” the Captain said, sounding out of breath.

“Rogers,” Tony replied. “Somebody got a workout, huh?”

The man’s glare bore right through Tony’s helmet and into his temple. He grinned behind his facemask. His first impression of Rogers had been that the man would be so easy to needle, and turns out he’d been right.

As usual.

Barton brought the plane in for a slow and careful landing on the now-abandoned plaza, and Tony helped Rogers bundle their prisoner inside. They cuffed his wrists together with a metal alloy that Fury said had been developed from the remains of the Destroyer in New Mexico. If anything could hold an Asgardian, it’d be that, and the odds of there being another alien species that looked more or less human were low enough that they could safely assume this guy came from the same place as the blond muscle-bound clod from New Mexico.

“Everybody secure?” Romanoff called from the copilot’s seat.

“In the plane, yes. In my sexuality? Eh…”

“Stark, shut up,” Rogers replied irritably. “Yes, we’re all fine back here.”

Tony grinned at Rogers, who glared and turned away.

This partnership was already so much fun.

Then Tony turned and saw their prisoner watching with no small amount of interest and amusement.

“So, can I just say - your hair looks like an evil Christmas tree,” Tony said, throwing himself into the seat across from the alien. “And the horned helmet was a bit much. Can you just do that summoning trick at will?”

“Stark,” the Captain growled.

Tony raised an eyebrow at him. “What? I’m interrogating the prisoner.”

“You’re not going to get anything that way,” Rogers snapped.

“Oh, and waterboarding is going to be so much more successful,” Tony drawled.

“He’ll lie to you.”

“And I’ll get to try and figure out what’s lie and what’s not,” Tony said reasonably. “It’s entertaining. Above a certain IQ threshold, at least.”

Rogers gritted his teeth.
“Stark,” Natasha said from the cockpit.

“Fine, fine… I take it back, Captain. It’s more of a personality thing. Okay.” He turned back to the alien. “Seriously, can you just make the helmet appear right here?”

“I have no obligation to respond to a pathetic mortal,” the Asgardian sneered.

Tony pointed at him. “I agree. Fortunately, you are in the presence of four of the very rare unpathetic subset of the human population, so we’re good!”

“You are all ants to me,” the alien said. Tony thought he’d read something in the man’s (or whatever he was) eyes, though. Surprise. Respect, even? His posture certainly sharpened a bit, as if he were engaging in the conversation for the first time.

“Makes sense. There’s several billion of us and only one of you. Ratio sounds about right, at least.” Tony sat back and waited.

The alien at last raised an eyebrow. Reaction, yes! “I could, yes.”

“What about the vanishing thing? Could you make any of us disappear? Or the jet?” Tony asked.

“Stark!”

“Hold that thought, Cap.”

“Don’t give him any ideas!” Rogers snarled. “Do you want him to escape?”

“As if he wasn’t already thinking the same thing,” Tony snapped back. “We’ve been on this plane for fifteen minutes. If he could’ve done any of that, he would have by now.”

“Then why even ask?” Rogers said.

_Huh._ He was a better debater than Tony’d expected. “Boredom? Apathy? A burning hatred for people who try to control me? Take your pick.”

“Stark, can’t you at least wait to tickle the sleeping dragon until it’s safely in a cage?” Romanoff said.

Tony glanced quickly at her and read the warning on her face.

“Simply for the excellent Harry Potter reference,” he said, stood up, and joined her and Rogers in the forward section of the jet.

“Stark, you need to keep your mouth closed,” Rogers admonished in a low tone. “You’ll give away information-”

“Please, Cap, I know better than that,” Tony scoffed. There wasn’t much that made him bristle, but this - one of his supposed _teammates_ implying that he wasn’t intelligent enough to handle a criminal - definitely rubbed his pride the wrong way.

“It’s a job for the trained investigators,” Rogers said stiffly. “Not us.”

“Right, and you _always_ follow orders to the letter, don’t you?” Tony said. He smirked when a muscle in Rogers’ jaw twitched.

“Both of you back down,” Natasha interjected. “Rogers, Stark can handle this on his own. Stark, you need to stop antagonizing him. We’re teammates now. At least until this mess is cleared up.”
Neither man said anything, but Tony stepped back and took a seat to the side of the copilot’s chair, silently giving in.

_Temporarily._

“What’s Harry Potter?” Rogers asked at last, reluctantly.

“You had to ask,” Natasha muttered as Tony sat bolt upright.

“Has no one told you about Harry Potter?” he demanded.

Rogers stared. “What? Who is this Potter? An enemy?”

“For the love of God. No. An epic book series. You have to read them at the first chance you get.”

Rogers’ face kept getting more and more confused, which was frankly quite entertaining. “A… book series?”

“Yes. Seven books, one intrepid hero with a wand.”

Rogers made a face.

“And they say my mind is in the gutter,” Tony remarked idly. “Not an innuendo, Cap. A magic wand.”

“But magic doesn’t exist.”

Tony raised a hand to his temple. “That’s the _point._”

They turned aside when they heard Barton snort. Natasha had swiveled around in her seat and was watching them with an expression of concentrated amusement, and even Barton had turned his head away from the controls to watch them.

“Never would’ve guessed the playboy Tony Stark was a nerd, huh?” Barton asked, grinning at Rogers.

“Not one of my more better-known interests,” the billionaire admitted, knowing full well that he was exuding a strong aura of smugness.

Rogers opened his mouth, but he was cut off when a steady high-pitched beeping started from the controls. The jet jerked and dropped abruptly.

“Shit - Tasha-”

Natasha flipped around and started skimming rapidly through radar screens. “There’s a - we’re in the middle of a storm-”

“I noticed!” Barton gritted out, hauling on the yoke and dragging the nose back up. Tony shared a glance with Rogers, and despite their differences, they understood each other well enough. They reached simultaneously for their weapons, Rogers slinging his shield onto his back and reaching for his helmet while Tony stepped backward into his suit where it waited in a specially designed rack on the wall.

Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled; the jet shuddered again. Tony’s visor snapped down over his eyes and he focused in on the alert face of their prisoner.
“Scared of a little thunder?” he joked.

“I’m not overly fond of what follows.”

Tony had half a second to try and sort out what that meant before the bay door screeched open and a figure in a snapping red cape appeared in the opening.

No one had time to say a word before the figure stormed forward, tore their prisoner from his harness, and dove back out of the jet.

“Thor!” Natasha shouted over the wind, clinging to the ceiling straps as she navigated back toward them. “He’s a friendly-”

“He just freed our prisoner,” Tony snapped. “Doesn’t seem that friendly.” He started for the door.

Rogers tried to grab him. “Stark, wait - we need a plan of attack-”

Typical soldier boy. “I have a plan: Attack.”

Tony leaped out of the plane, fired his thrusters, and tore after his prisoner.
Custody Battle

(Classified Location)

April 2011

It was too much. The deception had been one thing; sending the Destroyer another, but this? Attacking Midgard, making a spectacle of himself, posturing and attempting to rule them? Too much.

Thor hurled his brother - the word felt curdled and rotten in his mind, a mockery of what they’d once been - onto a rocky promontory. He didn’t know where he was on Midgard and didn’t much care.

“This is enough, Loki,” he growled. “Midgard is under my protection!”

“Stellar job you’re doing there,” Loki drawled, eyes glittering. He climbed to his feet and somehow managed to look menacing even with his hands bound. “The Kree remember what your protection is worth.”

Thor hesitated, struggling to place the statement. “You… are still fretting over that peace treaty? Brother, it’s been centuries. By the Norns.”

“We are not brothers,” Loki hissed, his face suddenly feral, vicious. It smoothed back out a heartbeat later, but the momentary change startled Thor.

“We were raised together,” he snapped. “We played together, fought together - do you remember none of that? Does that not make us brothers, in name if not by blood?”

“I remember a shadow,” Loki spat back. “I remember living in the shadow of your greatness. I remember our father raising me to hate my own kind; I remember my parents lying to me with every breath and every look; I remember dear Odin favoring you more with every passing decade. I remember being told that one day I would be a king, and then watching you build a legacy even more idiotic than Odin’s as you prepared to ascend the throne.”

Thor stared. “No, Loki. Your recollections are twisted, warped-”

“Hypocrite,” Loki mocked. “Look to yourself! Did you not believe me happy? Did you not believe me your most loyal sycophant, willing to follow wherever you lead? I was not either of those things. Not for many, many centuries now. So I ask you, whose memories are more wrong?”

“Bro- Loki,” Thor said, unsure of what would come out of his mouth but knowing he had to try. For her sake. “Loki, I have come...”

“Look at you,” Loki sneered. “You cannot even call me brother to my face. You don’t believe it any more than I!” He laughed. It was a howling, mirthless sound, born of dark triumph. “Why are you here, then? Why share words with me on this barren rock? Asgard’s justice awaits me, does it not?”

“I am here for Mother,” Thor said stiffly.

Loki’s face shut down. “Ahhh,” he breathed, “and now it all makes sense. The mighty Thor, lowering himself to speak with his traitor foundling brother, all for the sake of the one woman who has ever been able to check the Odinson’s rages. Did she mourn, Odinson?”
“We all did,” Thor said roughly. He remembered sitting on the shattered end of the Bifrost, having chased the repair team away for the day. He remembered a single tear falling into the abyss as he mourned not the brother who had fallen but the one he had known in their youth. He remembered Father solemnly dropping Loki’s favorite sword after his tear, a homage to a fallen warrior, and then putting his grief aside as they made preparations for the coronation.

He remembered Mother refusing to speak to Father for months, throwing herself into the repairs of the Bifrost, as befitted one of the most accomplished seidr masters in the Nine Realms, and turning her coldness on him as well, at times. He remembered the moment he had realized that this was Loki’s fault as well.

The traitorous prince had broken more than the Rainbow Bridge on Asgard.

Thor didn’t remember exactly when his grief had petrified into anger and resentment.

“Come home,” he forced himself to say. “Come home, Loki.”

“Asgard is no longer my home,” Loki said simply. “You made sure of that.”

Thor gritted his teeth. *Mother, I tried.* “Then if you will not come and make amends for your crimes, you will face the justice of the Allfather,” he said grimly.

Loki smirked.

Something slammed into Thor. The next thing he knew, he was flipping end over end along the forest floor, shattering trees and clinging to Mjolnir, at last spinning and landing on his feet.

Battle fury descended. Thor fell into a crouch and glared at the man facing him: a Midgardian, but encased in an ingenious metal suit. The Midgardian flew through the air and landed hard not far from Thor.

So it was to be a fight. Thor twirled Mjolnir.

This would at least let him work off some of his Loki-induced rage.

* [Classified Location]

*April 2011*

Steve didn’t have to search very hard for Stark and the new arrival, despite the fact that they were in an isolated forest in the middle of the night. All he had to do was follow the explosions.

He landed two hundred meters from the fight, disengaged from the chute, and ran toward them, seeking high ground.

From atop a fresh-fallen tree, Steve took in the scene at a glance: toppled trunks, scorch marks on the ground and the new man’s strange armor, fingerprints around Stark’s metal forearm. Surprise pinned him in place for several seconds. Stark was actually an excellent combatant, much better than Steve would’ve expected from reading his file. The newcomer - *another Asgardian, probably* - was impossibly fast and strong, but Stark fought smarter.

Steve shook off the shock and hurled his shield. It ricocheted off Stark’s head and the newcomer’s hammer and slammed back onto Steve’s arm.

“*Enough,*” he said angrily into the silence.
Stark and his opponent waited as Steve deliberately took a position halfway between them, creating a triangle, in the hopes of not taking a side and therefore defusing the situation.

“Not going to work,” Stark said directly into Steve’s earpiece. No sound came from the billionaire’s helmet speakers. “My new buddy is not the most rational of men.”

“Who are you?” Steve demanded. He readied himself to fight with Stark; they might not get along, but they were on the same side. He just hoped Stark would do the same.

“I am Thor son of Odin,” the blond Asgardian growled, “and you will leave me to my own affairs.”

_Thor. From New Mexico. The one in Foster’s files._

“Nuh-uh,” Stark said before Steve could open his mouth. “I don’t care if Reindeer Games up there stole your girlfriend or put Mentos in your Coke. You’re welcome to his leather-bound ass just as soon as we get back what he stole. Which I believe I already tried to communicate.”

“Loki is of Asgard,” Thor snapped. “He will face trial by our courts.”

“You mean by your king,” Steve said. His tone came out cooler than he had intended, but he couldn’t quite get past that tidbit he’d learned in the briefing on Asgard: a single person being the arbiter of justice? Not a good system.


“He didn’t,” Stark said, taking a step forward. Steve threw out a hand to stop him even as he processed his own surprise that the man had come to his defense.

“He implied that the Allfather’s justice is less than perfect!” Thor snapped.

Steve backtracked. “I was clarifying a legal system so different from most societies on Earth,” he said. “I meant no offense to Asgard or O- the Allfather.” How did my life get this weird?

Thor glowered, but relaxed his grip on the oversize hammer. Really, how did the guy fight with that thing? “We are not enemies,” he said at last. “I have no desire to continue battle with you.”

“Not now that it’s two on one, anyway,” Stark said straight to Steve’s earpiece. “He was plenty eager two minutes ago.”

“Then prove it,” Steve said, meeting Thor’s eyes. “Put the hammer down.”

He knew instantly that he’d made a mistake. The prince’s eyes flared up with rage, and his face contorted. “You want me to put the hammer down?” he roared, and leaped through the air.

The world slowed.

Steve saw Stark ducking and raising a metal arm before his head. He saw Thor flying toward him, the hammer descending. He saw his shield as he raised it in slow motion to protect his face, and even through closed lids, he saw the brilliant flare of light as the hammer met the shield.

The impact shuddered through his body. The only worse thing he’d ever felt was the blow as the Hydra ship crumpled onto the ice shelf.

A single ringing note split the air and left silence in its wake.

Steve, Stark, and Thor rose slowly to their feet. Even Thor looked a little disoriented, staggering
slightly as he stood and shaking his head twice as if to clear it. Stark took a step closer to Steve, who found himself glaring at the Asgardian. Their files said he was a prince, but Steve made a point of giving respect to people because they earned it and not because they had a dramatic title after their name. So far this guy had proved himself impulsive and prone to violence, not worthy of much respect at all. At least not as a prince.

“Are we done here?” Steve said tiredly.

Thor looked around the new clearing, trees toppled from the force of the impact, and nodded once.

“We will keep Loki in custody until we can retrieve what he stole and set right what he…” interrupted,” Steve said. “After that-”

“He’s all yours,” Stark finished.

Thor glanced once at them, and Steve might have been wrong, but he thought he saw both wariness and respect in the alien’s eyes. “We have a deal.”
Team Bonding

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

The story was flawless. She’d dropped off the grid because she was taking a vacation, as they had agreed four years ago as a reward for her flawless record: four weeks of off-the-record solitary a year. He had never promised to not keep an eye on her during that time, although given the pathetic results of the Widow Watch team’s surveillance attempts, he might as well have put the money and manpower into designing healthy Twinkies for all the good it did. And then she’d gotten a tip-off from a friend in SHIELD at a drop point - Barton, probably - and come in just in time to help with the Avengers.

Fury sighed and flipped the report of the Widow’s movements off the screen. He’d requested an itinerary from her, which she’d gladly provided, complete with hotel and restaurant receipts, train tickets, taxi slips, and other evidence. Unfortunately, Fury knew that faking every one of the papers in his office and every one of the files on his screen was well within Romanoff’s capabilities. And they still had no confirmed surveillance of her anywhere.

It didn’t sit right with him.

And now he had Tony Stark’s AI on his ship, even if it was restricted - only Stark could turn a cutting-edge bit of software into an annoying smartass - and Foster and Lewis to deal with. He checked the time on his desk. Eight minutes until their arrival.

The team was already gathering in the bridge, at the table behind him. He could see their reflections in the glass of the screens: Rogers and Stark shooting each other glares, Barton unreadable and apparently at ease as usual, Romanoff on the edges and looking dangerous, Banner and his deceptively mild-mannered expression. As Fury watched, Thor strode in with a heavy tread and stood near the head of the table, glowering at the rest of the team.

Stark and Rogers immediately stopped their staring contest and fixed their attention on Thor. That wasn’t going to end well. Apparently the only thing that could force those two to play nicely was a common enemy. And Fury really couldn’t afford to make an enemy of Thor.

Best to head this off before it began, and before the scientist showed up to complicate things.

Fury put his screens to sleep with a gesture, spun, and marched up the stairs to where they sat. The door hissed open, and Agent Halley walked in, followed by two brown-haired women.

Foster’s expression did several complicated things when her eyes fell on Thor, finally settling into a decent attempt at a poker face that nevertheless showed her vulnerability and seething anger. Fury filed that away and glanced at her companion, about whom he knew very little. Darcy Lewis, Foster’s longtime assistant and newbie to Stark’s PR team, had a smirk fixed on her face as she swept her eyes over every member of the team. It hardened as she cast a dismissive glance over Thor and turned away, clearly designed to irritate the Asgardian. Fury noted with some annoyance that her tactic worked. Thor tensed and shot a vitriolic look Lewis’ way. Meanwhile, sparks were already flying from Romanoff’s eyes as she scanned Lewis, and Tony shifted to face Thor more squarely, protectiveness in every line of his body.
He’d have to make this short. Before this group of very volatile, very powerful people dissolved into a fight that could quite possibly break the helicarrier.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

Several of the people in this room dismissed Darcy the second they saw her.

The Captain was one, Banner another, then Barton, and fourth was Director Fury himself. Darcy’d never met the man, but Coulson and Jane had told her plenty, not to mention the scuttlebutt in Stark Tower. (So she was a gossipy kind of girl. It never hurt to pay attention to the rumor mill.)

That was fine. She liked being underestimated.

Stark already knew her well enough to have gotten over his surprise that a brain lurked behind Darcy’s sarcasm and her boobs, and gave her a nod before he returned to smirking at every person in the room in turn. Darcy noted how he glared at Thor every now and then. Awesome, she’d have an ally against the God of Muscles and Assholery.

Darcy’s skin prickled when she felt the Black Widow’s eyes on her.

She deliberately didn’t look in the redhead’s direction. She’d read the files. Natasha Romanoff was as dangerous as they came, and she clearly saw right through Darcy’s carefully constructed facade.

Shit.

“The interrogators are with Loki now,” Fury said, announcing his presence with a snap of that melodramatic jacket.

“Good morning to you too,” Darcy said, and shot the man a sickly sweet smile. His eye twitched and she swallowed a smirk.

Thor stepped closer to the table. “You have no right to interrogate Loki,” he growled.

“Relax, Point Break, they won’t touch him,” Stark said. “Just asking a few questions.”

“He will not answer. Not truthfully.”

“Well, that’s not your problem, is it?” Stark said agreeably. Darcy knew him well enough to know that agreeable usually preceded extremely combative on the Tony Stark mood scale. She fell into a seat two down from him, Jane between them, and settled in to watch the show.

“It is my problem when he is my charge,” Thor snapped.

“Ten pounds of crazy in a five-pound bag? Fun charge.” This was from Barton, who apparently still had a bone to pick about Loki’s brainwashing of Agent Hill. Darcy had heard they were friends. Or something.

Thor turned his glare on the agent. "Have care how you speak. Loki may be mad, but he is my -- he is of Asgard."

Darcy wondered with interest what Thor had been about to say.
Romanoff shifted posture. Darcy was reminded strongly of a cobra she'd once seen in a zoo at feeding time. It looked totally relaxed and calm as it meandered around the enclosure, right before it struck. "He killed eighty people in three days."

"And your hands have no innocent blood on them?" Thor demanded.

Everyone in the room tensed instantly. Barton's head snapped up, relaxed demeanor vanishing, and fixed his eyes on Thor. But Darcy was mostly watching Romanoff. The Russian agent never moved, but something in her face - a tightness around her eyes, perhaps, or tension in her lips? - gave away her disquiet.

Darcy glanced around and realized that Thor had just made an enemy of everyone in this room, with the possible exception of Fury, who was the only one to not react.

The silence lasted several seconds. Darcy's heart thrummed.

Ohhhh-kay. Time for the poly-sci major to earn her keep.

"Look, this is maybe not the best time to be having this discussion," she said. "We're all tired, tense, and short on sleep, and we can't do jack shit until either Loki spills something juicy or Doctor Banner's instruments find the cube thing. Let's all go... sleep, or sharpen our knives, or whatever supersoldiers do in their down time, and reconvene when we actually have something to talk about." She deliberately didn't make it a question.

Barton shot her an assessing look.

"I agree," said Banner, standing. "I would like to find some food. Tony, would you care to join me?"

"As long as it's not that rabbit food you ate this morning," Stark said, rising as well. "If anyone gets into a fight, make sure it's caught on video."

The doctors left. Romanoff followed a second later, and Fury sighed. "Well, this meeting is well and truly over. Odinson, come with me; we have a spare single room..." His voice trailed off as he led Thor away.

Darcy blew out a breath and leaned back. "Well, that was spectacular. Janey, please tell me we have beds somewhere on this flying theater."

Barton snorted.

"No one's showed me where they are," Jane said. "Or my lab..." She trailed off, looking anxious.

Darcy made an irritated noise. "Of course you want the lab. Go chase down Stark, he probably doesn't even want to eat. Bet you fifty bucks he's already convinced his new bestie to eat something out of a petri dish so they can go straight there."

"No bet," Jane said instantly. "Good idea. Can you..."

Darcy waved a hand. "I promise not to set anything on fire. Go on."

"I hope they have the readings for me..." Jane mused, half to herself, and dashed out the door.

Darcy found herself alone with Barton and Captain America.

"Steve Rogers," the Captain said, holding out his hand.
Darcy shook it. “Darcy Lewis. Do I call you Captain, or Steve, or Mr. Rogers, or what?”

“Capsicle works,” Barton said, grinning.

“Capsicle? Who came up with that?”

“Stark, who else?”

Darcy nodded her appreciation. “Good for him. All righty. Capsicle it is.”

The man looked pained. “Can we stick with - first names are common now, yes?”

Darcy smiled cunningly. “That’s true, but I make no promises. Steve.” Inside, she felt like screaming. She was on a first-name basis with Captain America.

“I guess you can call me Clint, then,” the SHIELD agent said, finally tucking his tablet back into his pocket. His words were brusque, but in an exaggerated way that suggested the opposite. “If we’re to be teammates.”

Darcy made a face. “I’m more like… Jane’s handler. Even though I’m not her assistant anymore.”

“What do you do?” Barton asked. He seemed to be reassessing her. Darcy pulled her vapid face back on, not sure that she wanted these people to truly see her.

“Oh, some PR stuff for Stark Industries, mostly,” she said. “I was Jane’s assistant for the college credit, we became friends mostly because she needed someone to remind her to eat, and then once she went to SI I needed a new job. She put in a word for me with Stark, and here I am.” Cue the cheerleader giggle.

Clint - wow, okay, calling them by their first names would take some getting used to - gave her a look that said he wasn’t buying it. “Huh.”

“I think I’m going to go find somewhere to sleep,” Darcy said, standing. “Or eat. Whichever happens first. See you around.”

“Don’t get into trouble,” Clint said, grinning.

“Me? Never.” Darcy gave him her most innocent smile and flounced out with a deliberate swing to her hips and absolutely no intention of keeping that promise.
Jane didn’t know where she was going.

She’d gotten sidetracked calculating the energy requirements of an Einstein-Rosen bridge, and how they might change based on the destination, and how exactly it could be aimed at a location as specific as a balcony, and had it dropped Thor off midair above the Quinjet, in which case, could it just stop and leave someone in empty space? And the questions and formulae spinning through her head so thoroughly distracted her that she looked up and realized she had no idea where Stark and Dr. Banner had gone, or exactly where she was. The corridor was empty and narrow.

Jane bit her lip, looked back the way she’d come, and kept walking. She needed to find someone down here - she vaguely remembered descending a set of stairs, although she couldn’t have said how far down she’d come - who could guide her to a cafeteria or the labs. Or did they call it a mess hall here? SHIELD was technically a military program; the agents were, practically speaking, soldiers.

A door flew open just as Jane reached for it and hit her in the face.

“Ow!” She staggered backward, one hand to her nose.

“Apologies,” said a female voice. Jane knew from Darcy exactly what an insincere apology sounded like, and this was a gold-medal example.

“Watch where you’re going,” she snapped, and blinked tears away, and realized she’d just scolded the Black Widow.

Natasha Romanoff stood there and raised an eyebrow at Jane.

Jane glared back.

“I apologized,” Romanoff said at last.

“Insincerely.”

Impossibly, Romanoff’s lips twitched, and she inclined her head. “This is somewhat serendipitous, actually. I was looking for you.”

“Can you show me the way to the labs?” Jane asked instantly.

Romanoff snorted and started walking. “This way. You scientists, all obsessed.”

“I’m going to take that as a compliment,” Jane said. “And you do realize that obsessed scientists are the reasons you have all those fancy weapons?” She gestured to the concealed weapons lining Romanoff’s calves, hips, wrists, and collar. They were cleverly built into the suit, but not enough to fool Jane, at least not when she was looking.

Romanoff shot her an appraising look as they boarded an elevator, but said nothing.

Jane wondered whether the other woman’s silence would be unsettling to other people. Possibly. Probably. It should probably unnerve her as well, but then, she never did well with should, and she
didn’t really care what other people were doing anyway. If Romanoff was just going to stand there and imitate a statue, then Jane would happily go back to hypothesizing about the dispersal of energy when an Einstein-Rosen bridge ended in midair. There would possibly be a sound wave beyond the roaring of the Bifrost that she had heard on several occasions, and likely some sort of kinetic energy transferred to surrounding air molecules. In fact, just the passage of an Einstein-Rosen bridge would probably increase kinetic energy of the air. She’d never had a chance before, but she resolved to set something up to measure the impact of Thor’s departure on surrounding meteorological systems. If the Bifrost changed the weather, it was possible that some of the weather systems that more primitive civilizations had attributed to deities were actually caused by the arrival of an Asgardian, or even a member of another nonhuman species-

“Jane.”

“What?” She snapped out of her thoughts and focused on Romanoff, who was staring at her.

“I said your name four times.”

“Oh. Sorry. I was thinking about midair Einstein-Rosen bridges and weather systems. Do you think—”

Romanoff held up a hand. “I don’t understand the science very well. Save the hypotheses for Stark and Banner.”

“Okay,” Jane agreed. Hm. Maybe other people might have been hurt by that dismissal. She couldn’t be. She didn’t really care.

Wait.

“Didn’t you want to say something?”

Romanoff smiled. “I was wondering when you’d remember. Yes. You were… involved romantically with Thor, correct?”

“Was being the operative word,” Jane said sourly, all thoughts of the Einstein-Rosen bridge chased from her head.

“Good,” Romanoff said, to Jane’s surprise. “I don’t think many members of this team are going to get along well with him.”

“And you care so much about this team?” Jane said. “I thought you worked alone.”

“Yes. Normally. But I also work for Director Fury, and he’s assigned me to this team, which means I will not do anything to jeopardize its integrity.”

“So… why did you ask about Thor and me?” Jane asked. This was so not her sphere of expertise: social maneuvering, shifting alliances… She wrinkled her nose. This was exactly the sort of thing she let Darcy handle.

Romanoff led Jane into a corridor that Jane suspected wasn’t a normal route. She memorized its location. “I just like to know where all of you stand with one another.”

“Knowledge is power,” Jane said, remembering something Darcy liked to say.

“Exactly.”
Jane examined the other women for a moment. She supposed she should be afraid of the deadly Black Widow, but then again, she should have gone to nursing school, should be married by now, should care more about other people. But being a nurse would be boring, she’d yet to meet a man who could keep up with her, and what had other people ever done for her? Jane couldn’t bring herself to fear Natasha Romanoff.

“People underestimate you, don’t they?” she asked.

Romanoff’s eyes snapped to Jane’s so quickly that she could tell the other woman was surprised. “Yes,” the agent admitted after a second. “You as well?”

“Mostly they just think I’m a useless spacey scientist,” Jane said. She was beyond getting offended by it. Narrow-minded people were not her problem.

Romanoff smiled. “And they think I’m just another pretty face.” There was recent bitterness in her tone, but Jane didn’t ask. “Your friend, too. Darcy.”

Jane tensed slightly. Darcy had once described what she called her “vapid face,” a persona designed to make people overlook the mind underneath. Jane knew her friend was extremely intelligent, just in a very different way, but Darcy seemed to enjoy being underestimated. Jane couldn’t admit that to Romanoff.

“Often,” she said cautiously.

“I’m not asking you to betray your friend’s confidence,” Romanoff said. “Just stating a fact.”

A true one. Jane liked facts.

“Here you are,” Romanoff said abruptly, and gestured to a small door. Jane looked at it and then back at the agent.

“That doesn’t look like a lab.”

“It’s a back door,” Romanoff said, smiling faintly. “I do have other things to take care of, Miss Foster, and this was faster than going around to the main doors.”

“Jane,” Jane said immediately. “Call me Jane.”

Romanoff looked at her for a moment. “If you call me Natasha. We ought to stick together. Now that we have a common enemy. Enjoy your science.”

She turned and strode away.

Jane stared after her long after Natasha’s red hair and black tactical suit had vanished. The entire encounter had been odd, from the question about Thor to that weird parting sentence. Was Thor the common enemy, or Loki?

Jane couldn’t shake the feeling that something important had just happened, but she couldn’t for the life of her work out what. There was some subtext, some multilayered game of behavioral economics being played here, and Jane was missing it.

She’d have to run it by Darcy later.

But for now… Jane turned, shoved open the door, and found herself in the back corner of a large and well-lit lab packed with cutting-edge equipment. Thoughts of social games fading from her
mind, she smiled and set off to track down the data they’d called her in for.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

Clint found her where he expected to, in the bowels of the ship by the clear bay windows.

“Stewing?” he asked, because he knew her.

“Pissed?” she asked, because she knew him.

Clint snorted. “If this team manages to work together long enough to find the cube, it’ll be a miracle, much less fight off a horde of aliens.”

Natasha nodded and went back to staring out the window. Clint stood beside her in silence, watching farms and forests pass beneath the cloaked helicarrier.


Natasha turned her gaze on him, and Clint was reminded suddenly and forcefully that this woman was decades older than him, that she was in some ways something not human. He instinctively tensed when he saw the old and predatory darkness looking out of her eyes. It was something Natasha normally kept well hidden.

“A normal life isn’t an option for people like me,” she said softly, and turned back to the window.

Clint forcefully reminded himself that she was his friend. “That’s not an answer.”

Natasha was silent for long enough that Clint began to think she wouldn’t answer. Then she sighed and at last turned away, dark side tucked away once more. “No.”

“And you think you should.”

“At the end of the day, I like this life,” she said softly. “I’m psychologically and genetically wired for one thing, Clint, and that one thing does not involve children, or soccer balls, or minivans.”

“Well,” Clint said, “good thing there’s SHIELD, then. So you can keep on doing this and you’re on the side of the good guys.” He grinned at her.

“You know I’m just waiting until… until I find my Soldier,” she said softly.

Clint felt a shiver go down his spine, and concealed it. Never once in the years he’d known her had Natasha shown interest in anyone, man or woman. He’d never been interested in her, either, and good thing, because she’d finally told him five years ago about the man she’d once loved. Clint had his doubts that the Winter Soldier was who Natasha remembered. Rumor in the intelligence community was that the Winter Soldier was a ghost, a legend, someone larger than life. And still operating. If he’d never so much as contacted Natasha, it was doubtful that he still cared for her. Or remembered her at all.

But his Tasha wouldn’t hear it when Clint raised those concerns, so he did what a good friend would do and helped her on her so-far-fruitless search.
“And how’s that coming?” he asked, flippantly but softly. This was the loading bay, and the cameras didn’t have audio, but you could never be too careful. Fury overcompensated for his one missing eye with thousands of the electronic kind all over SHIELD facilities.

Natasha raised an eyebrow. “You going to tattle to Fury?”

“You know I wouldn’t.”

“I do,” she said. “Which is why I am going to tell you truthfully that I have a lead.”

“Really.”

“Yes. Old KGB contact.” Natasha’s smile was nothing short of feral.

Clint turned to her fully. “Yet you’re still here.” He knew how much this meant to her.

“My contact is meeting me in a month,” Natasha said quietly. “He says he can tell me where I can find the Soldier.”

“Need backup?” Clint asked.

Natasha squinted at him. “I wasn’t going to ask.”

“But you’re not going to say no, either, because we’re friends,” Clint said, and smiled.

Natasha considered him for a long moment, then nodded sharply.

Clint watched her walk away, and wondered where exactly this was going. Chaos, probably.

He couldn’t wait.
[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

The containment unit had been built for the Hulk, but Natasha supposed it worked just as well for superpowered aliens.

Loki was pacing slowly about the cell, back to its door, when Natasha slipped out of the shadows and stood on the platform.

He froze, then turned, a predatory smile on his face. “There are few people who can sneak up on me.”

“I have a unique skill set,” Natasha deadpanned. “And you knew someone would come.”

“After all the tortures Fury can concoct, you would appear as a balm, as a friend?” He paused. “And I would cooperate.”

“I want to know what you’ve done with Agent Hill.”

“I’d say I’ve expanded her mind.”

“And after you’ve won? After you’re king of the mountain? What happens to her mind?”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “What do you care for Agent Hill? I received the distinct impression that she does not care for you.”

“The feeling’s mutual,” Natasha said. It was true that she and Hill had had friction in the past. “But someone I care about cares about her. So here I am.”

“Ahhh,” Loki said, focusing more intently on her. “Agent Barton, correct?”

“You just get into every corner of her mind, didn’t you?”

Loki raised his hands, palms up. “I cannot do any differently.” He regarded her for a second longer, and smiled again. “Is this love, Agent Romanova?”

Natasha almost, almost flinched at the name. She hadn’t used it in a decade, and it was a reminder of a past that she kept buried. “Love is for children. I owe him a debt.”

Loki sat down, a slow movement that nonetheless belied his deadly strength. “Tell me.”

Natasha carefully pulled up a chair, calculating furiously in her mind. She needed to get something from him, something to end this and free her to hunt her Soldier. She and Loki examined each other carefully, and something in Natasha responded, recognizing a kindred spirit: someone who wore masks and traded in secrets for a living, who treated others like pieces on a chessboard.

This was going to be quite a mental battle.
“JARVIS, gimme the algorithms.”

“Screen five, sir.”

Tony flipped through the algorithms as fast as his fingers could move, calculating in his head and skipping one step after another. If he could just get the software to cooperate…

“These gamma signatures are definitely consistent with what Selvig got off the cube. But it could take weeks to get a hit off the cube; we have no idea where in the world to look.”

“Hopefully Foster can sort out how to track the opening of a bridge,” Tony said absently. “That’d be another angle. Maybe she’ll spot something we don’t.”

“Yeah, where is she?” Banner asked.

Tony turned away from the screen, blinked glowing number afterimages from his retinas, and said, “I sent her to get sleep. She’d been awake for forty-two hours, said she didn’t sleep in transit or anything. She almost set her hair on fire somehow messing with my wiring.” Hopefuly she’s learned her lesson. This is my lab.

“At least she brought clothes,” Banner said dryly, putting down the scanner and stepping over to a computer. “All I packed was a toothbrush.”

Tony narrowed his eyes, thinking about how easy Banner was to work with. The guy was so easygoing and low-profile, but it hadn’t taken Tony long at all to develop a healthy respect for the unassuming man’s sharp mind. And he could just tell that Banner was a boiling little ball of anger and resentment underneath all that mellow. Tony’s incisive curiosity reared its head. “You should come by Stark Tower sometime. Top ten floors are all R&D. You’d love it, it’s Candyland.”

“Thanks, but the last time I was in New York, I kind of… broke Harlem,” Banner said awkwardly.

Tony picked up a pen and meandered around toward the other man. “Oh, come on, that’s what building specs are for. They make ‘em stronger nowadays. And I promise a stress free environment. No surprises, no sharp things…”

Just as the door opened, he stabbed the pen into Banner’s ribs.

“Ow!”

Tony examined Banner’s hazel eyes intently. “Nothing?”

“Hey!”

“Oh, look, it’s Mr. Star-spangled Soldierboy,” Tony said amiably, then turned back to Banner. “You really have got a lid on it, haven’t you? What’s your secret? Mellow jazz? Bongo drums? Huge bag of weed?”

“Is everything a joke to you?” Rogers said angrily.

Tony gave him his best condescending look. “Funny things are.”
“Threatening the safety of everyone on this ship is not funny. No offense, doctor.”

“Maybe not if you’ve got a flagpole up your ass,” Tony said agreeably.

Banner ignored Tony. *Irritating.* “No, it’s all right. I wouldn’t have come aboard if I couldn’t handle… pointy things.”

“And you need to focus on the problem, Mr. Stark,” Rogers said with even more anger.

*Oh, it’s go time.* Tony squared his shoulders and stepped toward the captain. “You think I’m not? At this point, all we can do is wait for a spectroscope somewhere to pick up the cube’s signature. In the meantime, I’ve got my own little project going. Why did Fury call us in, and why now? Why not before? What isn’t he telling us? I can’t do the math without all the variables.”

Rogers stared. “You think Fury’s hiding something.

Tony made a note to research whether naiveté could be physically painful. “He’s a spy. Captain, he’s the spy. His secrets have secrets.” He pointed at Banner. “It’s bugging you too, isn’t it?”

Banner raised his hands. “I just want to… finish my work, and go—“

“Doctor?” Rogers’ voice brooked no arguments.

Banner hesitated, but at last he began to speak, and Tony mentally slapped himself on the back. He’d read the impassive scientist right. “’A warm light for all mankind’… Remember Loki’s jab at Fury?”

“Yes?” Rogers said. They’d all watched the surveillance tape.

“Well, I think that was meant for you.” Banner nodded at Tony, whose mind began spinning, factoring this into the situation. “I think he wants to communicate something to you.”

“Because of the tower,” Tony mused. Why would Loki want to communicate with me?

“The Stark Tower? That big ugly…” Rogers trailed off as Tony cast him a look like *Really?* “… building in New York?”

“It’s powered by Stark Reactors,” Banner continued, undeterred by their friction. Tony had to give him kudos for patience. “Self-sustaining energy source. That building will run itself for what, a year?”

“And it’s just the prototype,” Tony added to Banner, unable to resist the pride he felt in this accomplishment, then turned back to Rogers. “I’m kind of the only name in clean energy right now, is what he’s getting at.”

“So why didn’t SHIELD bring him in on the Tesseract project from the beginning? For that matter, why not Foster? Selvig’s good, and he’s got more experience, but Foster is just straight-up brilliant. It just makes sense to combine his experience and her new outlook.”

“And you,” Tony added. “No one knows gamma radiation like you do, and this cube is putting off a hell of a lot of it.”

“Ah… yeah, that too,” Banner said. “I mean, what are they doing in the energy business in the first place? Isn’t SHIELD a defensive organization?”

Tony decided he might as well spill. The Captain was standing there like a blond rock, brows furrowed and trying to process all this. Tony visibly saw him consider the possibility that Fury was
lying and then brush it away, ever the good soldier. Time to shock him out of it.

“Yeah, I’ll look into that, once my decryption program finishes breaking into SHIELD’s secure files,” he said, lifting his StarkPhone, where JARVIS’ progress report ticked upward in the top corner.

“I’m sorry, what?” Rogers was shocked. Angry. Excellent, that was better. Anger made people think more clearly. At least this person. If only Tony could redirect said anger…

Tony smirked and popped a dried blueberry in his mouth. “JARVIS has been running it since I hit the bridge. Won’t be long before I know every dirty secret Fury’s ever tried to hide. Blueberry?” He proffered the bag to Rogers, wondering if the soldier would take the olive branch.

Rogers slapped it away. “And you’re wondering why they didn’t want you involved in this.”

“SHIELD is keeping secrets from the people who are trying to help,” Tony countered. “We can’t do our job like good little flying monkeys unless we have all the information. An intelligence organization that fears intelligence? Historically not awesome.”

Rogers visibly controlled himself before he spoke. “Loki’s trying to turn us on Fury, to split us up. This is unfounded paranoia and it can only be detrimental. We have orders and we should follow them.”

“Such a good little soldier,” Tony mocked. “Following’s not really my style.”

Rogers stepped closer, an infuriating little smile on his lips. “And you’re all about style, aren’t you?”

Tony felt a muscle jump in his jaw. This arrogant little… “Of the people in this room, which one is A) wearing a spangly outfit and B) not of use?”

Rogers puffed up like an offended blowfish, but Banner headed off the rising tension. “Steve, tell me none of this smells a little funky to you.”

Tony watched Rogers’ face closely without seeming to, a skill he’d perfected in years of corporate meetings. Once again, Rogers almost seemed to be considering the possibility, but again, he brushed it off. “Just find the cube,” he snapped, and walked out of the lab.

Tony narrowed his eyes at the window. It was one-way glass, and he saw Rogers hesitate, then square his shoulders and set off toward the hull of the ship, not the bridge and the sleeping quarters.

Or possibly not the hull. Possibly he was heading for the storage units.

Smirking, Tony glanced back down to see if Banner had noticed, but the man was oblivious, already back to focusing on the staff.

Excellent.

“That’s the guy my dad never shut up about?” Tony mused. “Wonder if they shouldn’t have kept him on the ice.”

“He has a point about Loki,” Banner said.

Tony frowned. “There’s something off about this. Why is Loki trying to communicate with me?”

“Divide us. Like the Captain said.” But Tony could see that Banner was just playing devil’s advocate, that he had doubts too.
Tony shook his head. “It’s possible. But I get the feeling that there’s something bigger going on. We’re missing something. And if we’re not careful, we won’t find out until we’re all at ground zero of an alien invasion.”

“And I’ll read all about it,” Banner said dryly.

Tony turned to the other man, who was now adjusting one of the instruments on screen eight. “Or you’ll be suiting up with the rest of us.”

Banner laughed without amusement. “See, I don’t have a suit of armor. I’m exposed. Like a nerve. It’s a nightmare.”

“You’re afraid of it,” Tony said.

Banner was silent.

“I’m right, aren’t I? You’re afraid of what’ll happen if you can’t control it. Afraid of what’ll happen if you can. You’re tiptoeing, big man. You need to strut.”

There was something just beneath the surface of Banner’s pleasant expression. Tony knew he’d hit a nerve and waited.

“I have good reason to fear the H—the other guy,” Banner said at last.

Tony shrugged. “And I have good reason to fear the suit.”

“Ah, but you can control it.”

“Because I learned how.”

“It’s different.”

“Is it?” Tony swiped the data off the screen and met Banner’s eyes. “I’ve read up on your accident. That much gamma radiation? Should’ve killed you.”

Banner scoffed. “So you think the other guy saved my life?”

“I think he exists to protect you,” Tony countered. “I think he shows up when you’re in danger or angry or in pain. And I don’t know why you of all people, but I do think if you stop being afraid, you can learn to at least not break Brooklyn, this time. Capsicle might get miffed.”

“You might not like it if I do,” Banner said tightly.

Tony looked back. There was something underneath this man’s surface. The longer Tony observed him, the more he was sure that Banner was a ticking time bomb, just ready to blow up in the face of anyone stupid enough to betray him again.

“You just might,” he said at last.

Banner shot him one more look, a mix of apprehension and something else Tony couldn’t name, before at last he turned back to his screen and Tony followed suit.

Chapter End Notes
Hello to anyone reading this! (I still can't believe there are actually people interested in this story; you are wonderful.) Thank you to everyone who has left a comment! I have discovered that it is a normal thing for people to leave these notes, so here are some housekeeping things:

0.5. If anyone knows or has written good Loki/Avengers fanfic I would love it if you'd put links or story titles at least in the comments :)

1. I welcome constructive criticism. Please comment if you see any formatting glitches, grammar errors, plot holes, etc. in any of my chapters - I don't have a beta reader and I hate proofreading, so I wouldn't be surprised if there are some issues here and there.
2. I've been on break but I go back to school tomorrow (insert sobbing face emoji here) so updates are likely to slow down. This year will be a bit crazy, but never fear, I shall keep writing!
3. Some/a lot of the dialogue in this chapter and the upcoming set will be really similar to the Avengers film. I've tweaked some bits that I wanted to change for the purposes of this alternate plot, but I kept a fair amount, just because the original characters were really well written and we haven't deviated very far just yet from canon.

So yeah. I hope you all enjoy this story and I greatly appreciate all the comments and kudos!
Natasha picked her words carefully. “Like I said, I have a… specific skill set,” she said at last. “I didn’t care who I used it for. Or on.” Carefully, carefully, she let traces of vulnerability show on her face. “I got on SHIELD’s radar in a bad way. Fury sent Barton to kill me. He made a different call.”

“What will you do if I vow to spare his beau?” Loki murmured.

Natasha let her lips quir. “Not let you out.”

“Ah, but I like this,” Loki breathed, standing. “A world hanging in the balance, and you bargain for the life of one woman for whom you feel indifference at best.”

Natasha shrugged, knowing she had to give him something. “Regimes fall every day. I tend not to weep about it; I’m Russian. Or I was.” Now I’m nothing. Woman without country. “What is it you want?” Loki asked.

“I thought I made that clear.”

Loki shook his head. “You bargain for your Hill’s life for another reason.”

Shit. Natasha hadn’t wanted to go here, but there it was. One way to keep him on her string. “It’s really not that simple. I’ve got red in my ledger, and I’d like to wipe it out.”

“How does he know this?”

Loki said, stepping forward, and here was the predator; here was the vicious thing she’d expected from Thor’s stores, reveling in the opportunity to tear her apart. “Can you wipe out that much red? Drakov’s daughter?”

Oh.

“Sao Paulo?”

No no no

“The hospital fire?”

How does he know this?

“Hill told me everything.” Loki was watching her closely, drinking in every second of the torment that Natasha deliberately allowed to show on her face. She thanked her stars that she’d had the forethought to turn off the cameras in here. “Your ledger is dripping, gushing red, and you think doing a favor for a man no more virtuous than yourself will change anything? This is the basest sentimentality! This is a child at prayer, pathetic! You lie and kill in the service of liars and killers. You pretend to be separate, to have your own code, something that separates you from the horrors, but they are a part of you and they will never go away.”
You think I don’t know that? Natasha wanted to snarl. You think I’m so naïve? You think you’re so brilliant, but what you haven’t noticed is that I like this goddamn life.

But she couldn’t.

There was a tiny part of the girl she’d once been so long ago that she barely remembered it, a tiny fragment of a person long dead but not entirely exorcised, and it screamed and sobbed and trembled at his words, at the memories they woke. Natasha had long since made her peace with what she was and what she’d done. But now she used that half-forgotten shrieking fragment to turn herself into a trembling wide-eyed mess. The image of a shattered woman on the verge of falling apart.

And Loki bought it.

“You’re a monster,” she gasped out, turning away.

His smile was so many shades of cruel. “Oh, no. You brought the monster here.”

There it was.

Natasha straightened and turned back to him, all traces of the little-girl-Natasha fading away. “So. Banner. That’s your play.”

Loki’s smile fell away.

“Loki plans to release the Hulk,” Natasha said, pressing down on her earpiece to activate it and speaking directly to Fury’s shadow, Agent Lang. “Keep Banner in his lab, I’m on my way. Get Fury and Thor there as well.”

She looked back at Loki once, intending to revel in his shock, but surprise was only one of the things on his face. She saw respect and… satisfaction?

That made no sense.

Tucking away the odd observation to peruse later, Natasha dipped her head once. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

And she left.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

Secure Storage 10-C

Steve frowned at the words. He’d already searched the other two “Secure Storage” units, and gotten nothing for his pains: weapons storage, mostly, and data; some chemical and scientific stuff that he didn’t entirely understand beyond the “DANGER” and “BIOHAZARD” labels. He wasn’t even sure why he was doing this, really. Fury was his commanding officer, and that alone demanded respect.

But he couldn’t deny that the arrogant, narcissistic Tony Stark (so similar and so different from his father that it disoriented Steve whenever he looked at the man) had a point about Fury. He couldn’t
say that the scientists’ suspicions were unfounded.

Captain America wouldn’t have broken his orders like this. But Captain America was dead, and Steve thought he liked himself better as Steve Rogers anyway. Captain America was too trusting, and Steve Rogers - well, he could make Steve Rogers whoever he wanted.

Steve grabbed the door and hauled it open against its will.

Secure Storage 10-C didn’t look particularly different from its siblings 10-A and 10-B, except that the cases in here were all locked with much fancier-looking computerized locks.

This modern world gave Steve headaches way too often.

He crept through the shadows, vaulted up a level, and landed in a crouch, wincing at the clang his heavy military boots elicited from the catwalk. After several seconds, he concluded that the noise hadn’t drawn any attention, and slipped silently along. Steve didn’t really know what he was looking for, except that it would probably be near the back. People liked to keep their secrets hidden. Fury liked to keep his buried under eight layers of protection.

Steve made it to the back third of the storage bay before he noticed that all these boxes and compartments were labeled **Phase 2**.

He picked a drawer at random, listened carefully to check that he was still alone, and broke the lock off with two kicks.

The compartment released its secrets with a hiss, and Steve stared at its contents, first in shock and then in growing anger.

Impossibly, infuriatingly, Stark had been right.

And once again, Steve had been betrayed.

He knew how Captain America would’ve reacted: some anger, a discussion with his CO, and then a return to order-following.

Steve gritted his teeth and heaved the biggest piece of the betrayal out of the drawer.

He wasn’t Captain America anymore, and he would not stay loyal to the people who lied to him time and again.

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**[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier**

**April 2011**

Something about this whole situation was not right.

Darcy’s mind was spinning like a top, trying to fit all the pieces together. She didn’t know why no one else was seeing it - well, okay, she understood that some of them were just stupid, but that wasn’t her problem - and she couldn’t quite piece it together, but she knew something was off. Like that time Stacy Cratton kept saying she hated James Mason but dropped comments about him and never accounted for her absentee evenings, and it turned out they’d been dating on the fly for a year but couldn’t tell anyone because of James’ parents’ religion and his uncle who was one of the
faculty. Well, obviously not exactly like that, but still.

Darcy watched Loki pace from her hiding place in the observation room.

Somehow, SHIELD had made the wall look like a wall on the other side but a window from this one. She hadn’t known that was possible, but honestly she was way past her shock quota after the last couple years, and anyway she’d been creeping past the sleeping Loki and when she saw the cameras shut down she’d immediately ducted into the nearest unlocked door. It turned out that she was in a secret observation room the size of a closet. And then Natasha Romanoff walked in, and she discovered the speakers that relayed everything from the containment unit into her little spy closet, and this whole debacle got way more interesting.

And Darcy definitely did not mind getting to check out Alien Number Two without him knowing, because yeah, Thor was attractive, but his megalomaniacal younger brother was something else.

Heh. He was out of this world attractive.

Darcy had never expected to be able to use that pun in real life.

Even imagining what he looked like under all that complicated armor couldn’t distract her for long from the more serious thoughts that ran around her brain like rabbits on crack, which was annoying because Darcy had been enjoying those mental images, but she couldn’t deny that there was something serious to be contemplated and she was apparently the only person around ready to contemplate it. So she thought about the security footage she may or may not have hacked from a StarkPad on the way down here and Loki’s comment “a warm light for all mankind” and how Stark hadn’t been brought in on the Tesseract until Fury had no other option and how Loki hadn’t looked upset at all when Natasha figured out his plan. Darcy figured there were two likely interpretations of that information: either Loki was winding all of them up, or.

Or.

Darcy pulled out her StarkPad, issued when she joined the PR team, and placed a call.

“Lang? This is Darcy Lewis.”

“How did you get this number?” the agent on the other end snapped.

“Director Fury,” Darcy lied. “Can you patch me through to Thor?”

Irritating stick-in-the-mud. Darcy’s least favorite kind of person. “I’m on task for public relations. There was some footage of him and I need to ask him a few questions just so I can handle the press.”

“Ms. Lewis-”

“Look, don’t shoot the messenger,” she sighed, putting fake weariness in her voice. “I know you’re super busy and this is so not a good use of your time, and I’m sorry, but I really need to speak with him?”

A pause.

“Fine. We’ve issued him a StarkPhone and taught him how to answer calls. I’ll send you his number.”

“Thanks so much,” Darcy said, dripping fake gratitude, and Lang said “No problem” in a considerably warmer tone than he’d started with, and a message chimed through a few seconds after
she hung up with Thor’s intranetwork number and a smiley face.

“In your nasty-ass dreams, Agent Lonely,” she muttered, and called the number.

Thor’s voice rumbled through the line. “Who calls the Son of Odin?”

_Oh my fucking God, has no one taught him just to say “hello”? “It’s Darcy.”_

“Lady Darcy,” Thor said. “I did not get the impression, when last we spoke, that you wished to continue our friendship.”

“Sorry for any, um, miscommunication,” Darcy said. “And sorry to bother you, but if no one’s mentioned it I work with Stark’s Public Relations team and I need to ask you a few questions to handle the press. People tend to freak out a little when aliens with magic hammers named myeuh-myeuh show up.”

“Of course,” Thor said. “What information do you require?”

“Um.” Darcy scrambled. “First of all, just so I have it on record that you’ve stated this, do you mean any harm to anyone on Earth?”

“No!” Thor sounded offended.

“Okay, sorry,” Darcy said hurriedly. “I had to ask. Um. Next is… What tipped you off that Loki had come to Midgard?”

“Heimdall alerted Odin to a disturbance regarding Loki, although Loki himself remains concealed from Heimdall’s sight,” Thor said. “I was dispatched to capture Loki and set Midgard to rights.”

“Mmm. And why do you think Loki is doing this?” Darcy asked.

Thor paused. “Vengeance. He loathes me and Odin with a passion unmatched by any I have ever seen. There is no pain can prize his need from him.”

“So he’ll never stop unless he is stopped?”

“I would expect not.”

“Awesome,” Darcy muttered, and moved into the more important questions. “Do you think he has a chance of conquering Midgard?”

“I do not know,” Thor said. “Heimdall has yet to discover what Loki’s forces might be, or where he has been in the time since he fell from the Bifrost. However, he is not to be underestimated. Loki is a brilliant strategist both with politics and military campaigns. His mind is unmatched among Midgardians.”

Oh, Darcy so wanted to rip into him right then for his condescending attitude, but she held herself in check. She needed info. “So you still have no clue where he might’ve been all this time.”

“Some clues, but they would mean nothing to Midgardians.”

_He’s really asking for it. Deep breaths, Darce._

“I don’t remember anything about the mind-controller nightstick thing. Has Loki used that before?”

Thor paused. “No.”
“And have you ever heard of something with its power before?”

“No,” Thor said, drawing out the word.

“Is it possible it could be used on an Asgardian?”

“Fear not, Lady Darcy, I do not intend to allow Loki to use it on me,” Thor said.

*That’s not where I was going, but okay. “Answer the question.”*

“It is possible,” Thor admitted reluctantly.

*Time to move on.* “Okay. Uhhh… they also want me to ask if you think you can take Loki in a fight.”

“He is not trained nearly as well as I,” Thor said, pride ringing through the phone. “Loki has always disdained the use of weaponry, and his *seidr* - what you might call magic - is ill-suited for combat. Yes, I believe I can do so with ease.”

Darcy tapped a finger against her thigh, annoyed, and decided to bring out the big guns. She’d make him so mad he would never think to consider her important questions. “And do you feel any remaining filial attachment to Loki?”

Silence.

Excellent.

“No,” Thor said at last. “He has lied and murdered and betrayed me too many times.”

“Would you be willing to kill him?” Darcy asked innocently.

There was another weighty hesitation, and then Thor said “Yes… if it came to it.”

“What about torture?”

“What?” The Asgardian sounded shocked, offended.

Darcy smirked, even though he couldn’t see her. “Like, to get the information of the Tesseract from him before his plan goes through. Could you do that?”

“I do not know how things are done here on Midgard,” Thor seethed, “but on Asgard we are above such cowardly and ignoble tactics! I would never stoop so low! I-”

“Wonderful,” Darcy said, her voice as chipper as she could make it, “that’s all I needed to know. Thanks!”

She hung up on him.

Her tactic had worked perfectly. Hiding her *real* questions, like those about the scepter, in the middle of emotionally charged *other* inquiries was a surefire way to get people to forget everything but what made them sad or pissed. And she knew Thor well enough to know exactly how to fire him up.

The brunette woman cracked her knuckles and looked out at the containment unit. Loki was pacing circles around it, and the cameras were still down - looked like Natasha hadn’t turned them back on in her rush to go keep Banner’s skin the same color.
That was good. Because Darcy smelled something off here, something about the appearance of the scepter and Loki’s unknown possible army and the look on his face as he’d watched Natasha leave, and she wanted to talk to him in person.

She straightened decisively, gauged her fear (low) and her anticipation (high), and stepped out of the closet.

Loki’s eyes fastened on her.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to a helpful commenter, I realized that some of the strategy things in this chapter might not be as clear as I had hoped, so I'm going to put a modified version of my reply to that person in the comments here to help explain if anyone's interested. If you got it or you don't care, you absolutely don't have to read this; it's just here for clarification!

"What I was going for was that Darcy used a trick my friend taught me: when trying to get information from someone, don't start or end the conversation with that question or those questions. Start and end the conversation with things that are innocuous or unimportant, because people tend to remember the first and last parts of dialogue, not what happened in the middle. (At least not clearly.) The more you can bury the questions you *actually* want answers to in the middle of other things or (better yet) piece together what you want to know from fragmented scattered questions (Darcy doesn't get that complicated here because it's not necessary with a character as guileless as Thor), the better. Soooo, what she was going for is that she just suspects there's a missing piece to the whole situation (she's correct) so she was gathering information about Loki, his weapons, his abilities, and his past; the important questions were those concerning the scepter and its powers.

On the subject of torture, she mostly asked that because she knew it would make Thor angry (he's so noble that he really crosses through the land of nobility and into somewhere on the other side that's ridiculous, inefficient, illogical, and has no name that I'm aware of). Emotion also clouds memories; she knew he'd get so hung up on the fact that she questioned both his willingness to protect Midgard and on the thing about torture that he'd be furious and forget the questions that had less emotional impact, which were the questions she cared about.

But your second point - that he's "he's not in it to win it, because a reasonably-bright ten year old could come up with a more effective plan for conquering the world given Loki's resources, let alone a brilliant strategist" - is absolutely dead on. Darcy hasn't quite gotten there yet, but this is the foundation."

Hope this helps! (I had a *ton* of fun writing this chapter and the verbal jousting in it. I dislike exercise, but wordplay I can do! :D )
Bruce looked at the progress report whenever Stark wasn’t paying attention.

The billionaire had finally gotten the software to cooperate and the model locked in; Bruce had done his own part, and now there was nothing left to do but go through SHIELD’s comprehensive files on Puente Antiguo for the seventh time. Bruce tried to focus on that, but he couldn’t stop himself looking at the progress report. He fell into a sleep-deprived rhythm of read, check, read, check, until he didn’t even actually look at the percentage on the screen where Stark had left it anymore; it was mostly a habitual reaction to make sure that it was still there. He was in stasis.

So it came as a surprise when he glanced up and the progress bar was gone, replaced by a distorted image of Stark’s tight face through the screen as he swiped through files.

Bruce blinked tiredness away from his eyes. “Is it done?”

“Oh, it’s done, all right,” Stark said, and Bruce realized how angry the other man was.

That was when Nick Fury walked in through the door and brought all of his anger with him.

Stark pushed the screen aside and pulled out his StarkPhone, swiping through it and glancing unconcernedly at Fury, all his anger deftly hidden. “If you need blood pressure medication, I’m afraid I can’t help you, I’m only on antipsychotics.”

“What are you doing, Mr. Stark?” Fury snarled.

Stark raised an eyebrow. “Uh, kinda been wondering the same thing about you.”

Fury’s temple pulsed. Bruce wondered detachedly what the man’s heart rate was, and if his own was getting too high. He took a second to monitor it, decided he was in the clear, and was dragged back to the moment by a scolding about how apparently he and Stark weren’t doing their jobs.

“We are,” Banner said, finding that a lot of his anger was directed at Fury in this moment. “The model’s locked and sweeping for the signature. When we get a hit, we’ll have a location within half a mile.”

“And then you’ll get your cube back, no muss, no fuss,” Stark said, in a dangerously polite tone. His phone dinged and he looked down with a furrowed brow. “Yeah, what is Phase Two?”

Fury’s face tightened alarmingly, but before he could speak, Steve Rogers stepped through the still-open door and dropped a massive and science-fiction-y gun that resembled a handheld cannon on the table.

“Phase Two is SHIELD uses the cube to build energy weapons,” Steve snapped, and glanced at Stark. “Sorry. Computer was moving a little slow.”

“Glad to see you came to your senses,” Stark said dryly.
“Rogers, we gave you everything related to the Tesseract,” Fury said, visibly struggling to stay calm. “That doesn’t mean-”

“I’m sorry, Nick-” Stark spun a screen to face Fury, covered in what Bruce considered fairly damning evidence. He felt his pulse rising and struggled to control it.

Was he imagining a green tinge to his reflection in the window?

“What, were you lying?” Stark said with vicious satisfaction.

“I was wrong, Director,” Steve said quietly. “The world hasn’t changed a bit.”

_Lying. They were lying._

Romanoff and Thor marched into the room. The tension palpably escalated.

“You want to think about removing yourself from this environment?” Romanoff asked, stepping toward him.

Bruce glared. “I was in Calcutta; I was fairly well removed.”

“Loki’s manipulating you,” she warned.

He let out a harsh _ha_. “And you’ve been doing what exactly?”

“Loki’s the one that prompted us to find this lie,” Stark said. “Trying to communicate with us. With me.”

Romanoff froze, then turned to him. “What do you mean?”

A buzzing filled Bruce’s ears, and he missed Tony’s explanation, but Romanoff’s response caught his attention. “He was odd when I spoke to him as well,” she said slowly.

Fury turned on her. “You spoke - I ordered that that containment unit be restricted to anyone but me!”

Romanoff gave him a look that dripped disdain.

“There’s something more going on here,” Tony added.

Bruce was watching Fury still, and he noticed that the man _definitely_ reacted to that statement. With what, he couldn’t tell, but something.

Fury knew more than he was telling. More even than was in the files.

“I’d still like to know why SHIELD is building weapons of mass destruction,” Bruce said, struggling to stay calm. If the conversation stagnated he’d just keep spiraling up. “Because of him,” Fury half shouted, pointing at Thor.

Everyone shut up.

“Me?” Thor looked equal parts shocked and furious.

“Our first interaction with someone not of Earth revealed that not only are we not alone in this universe, we are hopefully - hilariously - outgunned,” Fury snapped.
Thor glared. “My people want nothing but peace with Midgard.”

“But you’re not the only people out there, are you?” Fury shot back.

“You still shouldn’t have kept it a secret,” Stark snapped.

Bruce was struggling to process all this. He understood Fury’s reasoning. He even halfway agreed with it. But he didn’t trust that those weapons would be used well in the hands of this man in particular. And he was so sick of being lied to and betrayed and used by every authority figure he ever interacted with.

Looking at the faces of Stark and Steve, temporarily united against Fury’s lies, Bruce suspected his teammates felt more or less the same.

“Your work with the Tesseract is what drew Loki to you,” Thor growled.

“So now we’re not even allowed to defend ourselves?” Romanoff said, rounding on him. “We’re supposed to rely on the protection of a monarchy we can’t even contact on our own yet?”

“It was a sign that the Earth was ready for a higher form of war,” Thor insisted.

“War has no higher form,” Steve fired back.

“All of you calm down,” Fury ordered.

Thor rounded on him. “And you. Do you always treat your champions with so little trust? I do not think I wish to work under your command any longer, Director.”

“No more secrets,” Stark snapped. “And I don’t trust you with those weapons.”

“I’m sorry, remind me how you made your fortune?” Fury said.

“And I stopped because I saw the damage weaponry can do in the wrong hands,” Stark rejoined. “I was betrayed by someone I trusted and something that was only supposed to be used for good ended up murdering innocents. So I changed. I thought I’d gotten away from that.” He glanced at Steve. “Looks like we were both wrong.”

The StarkPhone dinged again. Bruce’s ears were still buzzing but he forced himself to pay attention, stay focused-

“Well this is interesting,” Stark said. “Capsicle, remind me - how long did it take them to wake you up?”

“I woke up three weeks ago,” Steve said tightly. “Four days after they pulled me out of the ice.”

“Ah, ah, ah,” Stark said. “Looks like we found another one of Fury’s little lies.” Fury, Bruce noted, was about to burst. “You were in a medically induced coma for fourteen months before they brought you out of it.”

“What?” Steve shouted.

“And you know why Fury got you involved?” Stark continued, speaking to Steve but with his eyes locked on Fury. “Because of her.”

Romanoff’s composure was perfect. She arched a single auburn brow as every eye in the room turned to her.
“I am a loyal SHIELD agent,” she said tightly.

“Evidently Captain Eyepatch here has his doubts,” Stark said. “Because Captain America was his trump card in case the Widow ever went rogue.” He glanced down at the phone again. “Oh, so that’s where Coulson is.”

“Coulson,” Bruce said, and Steve looked up as well. “He’s a… a good man.”

“He’s coming back from Fury’s little hidey-hole called Widow watch,” Stark said, every word a bullet, and looked at Romanoff. “Looks like your boss really doesn’t trust you. He has a full-time fully-staffed task force stalking your every move.”

Romanoff looked at Fury.

“You went off the grid,” he snapped. “I got worried. Understandably.”

“Hold up,” Bruce said, thoughts tangling around the one snag in this line of conversation. “You left Captain America in a medical coma. Captain America is on the SHIELD threat watch list?”

“Probably ranked right around a swarm of angry bees,” Stark muttered. “Threatened! I feel threatened! Fury, you let a threat onto your team!”

“This isn’t a team, this is a chemical mixture that does the opposite of teamwork,” Bruce said, because it was the one thing he was sure of right now. Exhaustion was eating away the edges of his rationality and his control, but this he knew. “We’re… we’re a time bomb.”

He became aware that his fists were clenched.

“You need to step away,” Fury warned, hand going to a pistol holster on his hip.

Bruce’s laugh caught in his throat.

“You people are so petty,” Thor mused. “And weak.”

“You didn’t think that when we fought in the woods, Point Break,” Stark sneered.

Thor took a step closer, squaring up. “Remove your metal suit and what do you become?” he challenged.

Stark shrugged, the dismissal in his eyes perfectly calculated to wind Thor up. “Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.”

“Yet I could take you weaponless in naught but my nightclothes,” Thor scoffed.

“Back off,” Steve warned, stepping forward. “We’re on the same side here.”

“And you,” Thor added, rounding on the Captain. “You call yourself a hero of your people? Everything special about you came out of a bottle.”

“Well, this is fantastic disproof of the idea that Asgardians have higher IQs than we do, because you clearly did not understand the files in the slightest,” Stark mused.

“Enough,” Romanoff warned.

Thor turned his glare on her. Steve and Stark remained shoulder to shoulder. Fury stood to the side. Bruce wanted to laugh. “Yeah, this is a team…”
“Agent Romanoff, escort Dr. Banner to…”

“Where?” he mocked when Fury trailed off. “You rented my room.”

Fury sighed and adopted a patronizing tone. One of Bruce’s major pet peeves. “The cell was just in case.”

“In case you needed to kill me, but you can’t! I know, I’ve tried!” Bruce spat.

A beat of silence took the room.

“I got low,” he continued, wanting to shock them, to make them understand, sleep deprivation shattering the controls he normally kept around both his past and his emotions until he couldn’t stop the words pouring out of his mouth. “I couldn’t see a way out, so I put a bullet in my mouth. The other guy spit it out. So I moved on. I focused on helping people. I was good until you dragged me back into this freak show just to lie to me exactly like Ross did!”

He paused, breathing heavily, and turned to Romanoff, who was visibly unnerved for the first time. Good. Let them see what he really was. “You want to see my secret, Agent? You want to know how I stay in control?”

“Dr. Banner,” Fury said, his voice tightly controlled. “Put down the spear.”

Bruce looked down at his hand.

The gold handle of the staff winked innocently back at him.

Bruce dropped it with a clatter.

The buzzing faded, disappointed, and he was once again himself. Tired, hungry, angry and betrayed, but securely in control.

“Sorry, kids. Guess you don’t get to see my party trick after all,” he said caustically.

The tension in the room was shattered by a beeping computer.

“Got it.” Stark walked over to the screen and started scanning windows. “Readings are consistent. Banner?”

Bruce shook his head, stepped away from the scepter, and pulled up his workstation.

“This is ridiculous. You are all of you beneath me. I’ll go after the Tesseract on my own,” Thor snapped. “Tell me where it is.”

“We go together,” Stark snapped.

Bruce stared at his screen, willing the location to load.

“After this display?” Thor shook his head. “You Midgardians are petty, squabbling creatures. You will only slow my progress. The Tesseract and Loki both belong on Asgard, where they can properly be controlled.”

“Because you’ve done a fantastic job controlling Loki so far,” Steve said.

The blank screen blinked and beeped and spat out a location.
Bruce’s eyes widened. “Guys-”

And explosion shook the helicarrier.

Bruce fell, and fell, and hit a metal catwalk with a crash.

Sensations assaulted him. Thor shouting “I go after Loki!” and Steve saying something about a suit and Fury barking orders; the cold bite of metal into his skin, the ache of new bruises, the taste of acid on his tongue and the thunder of his pulse. The only thing he could think as he looked around and saw an engine room all around with Romanoff trapped next to him was that his heart rate was skyrocketing and he was so angry and so afraid and too tired to control anything, much less himself.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

“If I’d known Midgardian women all looked like you and the illustrious Black Widow, I may have visited this pathetic realm sooner,” Loki mused.

Darcy shrugged. “Well, unfortunately, not everyone can look this awesome. You just got lucky. There’s a disproportionate number of physically attractive people on this flying funhouse. I think they put something in the water.”

Loki blinked blue eyes at her.

Darcy did a clinical scan of his body, head to feet and back up again. “Huh. From what Thor said, I thought you’d be shorter.”

“You know Thor?” he asked, drifting closer.

Darcy sat down in the chair Romanoff had abandoned. “Uh. Yeah. He dated and dumped my best friend.”

“You here you are, working with him.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Darcy said, examining the prisoner. He didn’t act like he cared about being locked up, which was worrying in itself. “I’m working for the same people he’s cooperating with.”

Loki half smiled. “A subtle distinction.”

“But important.”

“How long have you been watching, little Midgardian?”

Darcy snorted. “Enough with the condescension. I get plenty of it from Sir Asshole. Are there any Asgardians who wouldn’t make me want to punch them in the face?” She paused. “Oh, and - a while. I hid when I saw the cameras go down.”

Loki was smirking.

“But you knew that, didn’t you,” Darcy said, realizing.
His smirk grew bigger.

“You weren’t sleeping at all when I walked in.”

Loki shrugged gracefully, and then, with a flash of green light, he had a body double lying on the hard metal bench. “I can’t say that I was.”

“Why’d you ask, then?”

“To see if you would lie.” The body double vanished.

“I try not to lie unless there’s something to get from it.”

Loki smiled. “A woman after my own heart.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow and waggled her fingers in his direction. “Doesn’t seem like you’ve got one. Genocidal megalomaniac and all that shit.”

“You do not know me,” Loki said in a hard voice.

Darcy fell silent. She didn’t really know why she was here, or where she was going with this conversation, except that there was something intriguing about him. And obviously she wanted to learn more, like for the sake of the team. Duh.

Nope. Definitely no selfish motives here.

“Tell me about Asgard,” she said at last.

Loki blinked. Clearly he hadn’t been expecting that.

“Why do you ask?” he said.

She made a face. “I’m trying to figure you out.”

“Your interrogators already tried.”

“Yeah, but see, they’re stupid. And I’m not. So.” Darcy didn’t actually think that. Mostly. They were well educated and intelligent people, probably, but she suspected they’d been too narrow-minded and too afraid to actually get anything out of Loki. Plus this was her area of expertise.

And also, possibly, a chance to be useful for once in her stupid life.

Darcy shoved away that uncomfortable self-analysis and glared at Loki, waiting.

Impossibly, after a few seconds, he laughed a little. “You are quite a spitfire, did you know that?”

“I’ve been informed,” Darcy muttered. “It’s not usually a compliment.”

“It is from me.”

A warm glow of pride settled in her stomach, and she did her best to shove it away. Bad Darcy, she told herself. Do not take compliments from crazy people!

Loki sat back on the bench. “Asgard,” he mused. “The realm of my youth is very different from Midgard. Our technologies are so far beyond yours that to many Midgardians we might seem as though we do not use technology at all. It is... both wondrous and horrifying, at times. In many
ways, it is better than your realm. In others, it is worse.”

Darcy was silent a moment, stilling her heart and telling herself sternly that seeing Asgard was a ridiculous thing to want. “You suck at storytelling.”

“I wasn’t telling a story,” he said with a cruel smile.

“Then tell one.”

“Don’t you have somewhere else to be?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Nope. Plus bothering people's fun. I’m like a gold-medal pest.”

“Here’s a story,” he said, approaching the glass until he loomed over her. Even though this cage was built for the Hulk, it felt freakily thin, but Darcy refused to stand. It felt too much like chickening out. “There was once a little boy with a heart full of love and ambition, who grew up believing that he would one day sit on a throne. Then one day his eyes were opened, and he realized that he never would, because the people who’d loved him had lied to him all his life. Love turned to bitterness and then to hatred, and ambition untempered by love is a dangerous thing. Now that little boy is a boy no longer, and he's come to make somebody pay.”

Darcy looked at him for a long moment, and he looked back.

“Sounds like a story that hasn’t been finished yet,” she said at last.

Loki flinched.

That caught her attention. Darcy squinted at him. A flinch was decidedly against Darcy’s code, and she thought probably against his also, because it revealed far too much to the people around you.

When Loki’s gaze returned to her, something in his face had hardened, those glacial blue eyes turning frozen and cold. “You ought to leave.”

“I think we covered this,” Darcy said, glaring at him. “Gold medal pest, remember?”

That was when the explosion happened.

The world faded in and out.

Darcy blinked and ordered the fuzziness in her eyes to go away. It receded a little, reluctantly, and she sat up even though her body ached all over.

She was lying at the top of the catwalk stairs where Romanoff had come from earlier, crumpled against the cold metal. She’d been thrown when…

Oh. Right. The explosion.

That probably wasn't a good sign.

Darcy raised a hand and felt around gingerly on her scalp. Her fingers found an insanely tender patch on the back, already rising into a bump and damp with blood. “Mother fucker,” she hissed, and dragged herself to her feet.

Loki.
She spun and almost fell because apparently her balance was shit at the moment and her eyes fastened on Loki stepping out of his cell and she realized that the glass had been doing its job after all, because he was so much more intimidating with nothing but air in between them.

“You could’ve done that all along,” Darcy complained.

He didn’t smile; his face had gone cold and blank. “Yes.”

Feet pounded on the stairs. “Loki!” someone shouted.

Darcy knew that voice.

Loki looked at Darcy. “Hide, little Midgardian. If you interfere in the slightest, I will not be permitted to spare you.”

“Permitted?”

Loki’s glare intensified.

Darcy scrambled aside and into the same little room with the one-way window that she’d hidden in before, feeling like she’d just been given a clue to something that she really should be able to grasp but couldn’t, yet. It was like looking into a black room and not knowing if it was the size of a closet or a football stadium, and she was holding one of those badass military flashlights, and if she could just turn it on she’d figure things out.

“Loki,” snarled a familiar voice, and when Darcy shoved her hair out of her face and jammed her glasses back up her nose, she saw Thor standing in the doorway, glaring at Loki.

The tension in the room was thick enough to taste.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand here we have more plotting, infighting, alliances made and broken, and a transition into the ACTION phase! (The next chapter may be pretty long; it's the fight on the helicarrier and it's got a lot of quick, dramatic flashes since everything is basically happening at the same time. Fair warning.)

I'm very excited, in case anyone couldn't tell.

Thank you to everyone reading this! As always, constructive criticism is welcomed (plot holes, grammar errors, formatting glitches, inconsistencies with canon descriptions of characters, etc.) in the comments, as are Avengers fic recommendations. (Seriously: if you know any good fics, please let me know!)

Happy reading!
Steve caught Stark by the shoulder instinctively when the ship lurched. He watched Natasha and Banner fall, lunged for the scientist and was too slow.

“I go after Loki!” Thor bellowed, and dashed out the door.

Fury barked orders into his earpiece. “Has Coulson landed yet?”

“Put on the suit,” Steve snapped.

Thank God Stark didn’t argue, just said “Yep,” and bolted out of the lab. Steve was right on his heels.

“Meet me at the downed turbine!” Stark yelled over his shoulder, running.

Steve shoved aside his misgivings about the man, which had been assuaged somewhat by the fact that they were both pissed at Fury, and shouted “Got it!” before taking off in the direction of the engine.

His earpiece crackled into life a few seconds later, spilling chatter into his ear. He ignored it until a familiar name caught his attention.

“Coulson! Initiate initial lockdown on the detention center, then get to the bridge,” ordered Fury.

“Copy that, sir.”

Relief washed over Steve as he ran. Coulson was a good man. It was nice to know he was alive.

“Rogers! Where are you going?”

Fury. Steve shoved aside his anger. “What turbine is down?”

“Turbine one.”

“Stark and I’ll get it back up.”

“On the double.”

“Yes, sir,” Steve said, although he didn’t know if Fury really deserved to be called “sir” anymore.
Natasha couldn’t remember ever being this afraid.

Not the first day she’d walked into the Red Room. Not the day before her graduation. Not the day of her first mission, or her last. Not even when she’d watched her Soldier vanish into the bowels of KGB neural programming, away from her. Every time in her past, her fear had been tempered by the conviction that she could overcome all the terrors she faced.

This was different.

This was an enemy that she knew very well she might not escape.

And she was trapped not ten feet from it.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

“Get me a status report!” Fury bellowed.

Clint left that to some other agent and swept the upper bastions of the bridge carefully. They’d been boarded, that much was clear, and if Hill was with them they’d know exactly how to penetrate their -

Gunfire split the air.

Barton dropped, rolled, and came up shooting, sticking to his sidearm - in close-quarters fights, shooting arrows was basically handing your enemy gift-wrapped improv knives. Two men in tactical gear fell just inside the door. Fury dropped the next with a neat throat chop, grabbed his automatic rifle, and sprayed a burst into the hall.

He glanced at Clint. “They are not getting through that door, so what-”

Clint spun and raised his bow in one motion, firing at a flicker of motion almost without aiming. His arrow sailed through empty space a millisecond after Agent Hill vanished from the viewing window.

It was a few seconds before Clint realized she’d dropped something, and it was giving the tech guys fits.

That was when the lights went out.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

“Loki, this is madness,” Thor growled.

Loki stopped just outside the containment cell, that insufferable smirk on his face. “You tend to define ‘madness’ as anything with which you do not agree, brother.”
“I have disagreed with you many times in the past and never called you mad,” Thor snapped back. “This is too far.”

Loki glared, and Thor didn’t recognize anyone he knew in the disguised Jotun’s face.

“This is as far as you have driven me,” Loki hissed.

Thor’s free hand clenched into a fist, and he tightened his grip on Mjolnir. He couldn’t believe the audacity. Loki had a duty to the throne of Asgard, to Odin and to Thor, and here he was abandoning it to attack a realm under Thor’s protection. “You should not have chosen the realm I care about!”

Loki laughed. “Splendid job you’ve done. The Midgardians slaughter each other in droves while you watch from Asgard and congratulate yourself for your benevolence. I mean to rule them as a god, to bring them to heel.”

“I will not permit it,” Thor snapped. “I am the Crown Prince of Asgard, and you will obey!”

“And I am the heir to the Jotun throne,” Loki snarled back. “All I ever wanted was to be your equal, and now I am. I do not bow to you or any other as my liege. No longer.”

Rage darkened Thor’s vision, and he flung himself at his one-time brother with a roar.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

There were shadows, and there was his prey.

He was crouching behind a metal cylinder, panting, orienting himself.

He was scenting a female, very close. The one who’d manipulated him, the one who worked for the man who’d lied and lied and lied.

He was hunting.

She was running.

He liked when his prey tried to escape.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

“Stark!” Steve shouted.

There was no reply.

He tried to quell the doubts - to not let himself wonder if Stark had slacked, or skipped out, or-
“I’m here. We’re on a private comm channel.”

He spun and saw Stark in his Iron Man suit soaring up to the engine by the debris. Two SHIELD techs in oxygen masks and bearing fire extinguishers paused their work to watch him approach. Steve waved them back inside. One of them offered him a mask, but he pushed it away, knowing from experience that he wouldn’t need it and it would only impair his vision.

“I’ve gotta get the superconducting cooling system back online,” Stark said. It sounded like he was mostly talking to himself. “Then I can get in and dislodge the debris from the rotors.”

“What can I do?” Steve asked, trying not to get annoyed. Scientists were terrible in crises.

“Get to the engine control panel and tell me which relays are in overload position,” Stark said.

Steve almost asked how to find the control panel, but then he saw a big red sign across the howling gap that had been torn in the engine control room saying “ENGINE CONTROL PANEL.” With one leap, he cleared the distance, steadied himself by the panel, and waited.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

“EMP!” someone shouted.

The bridge was chaos. Clint heard screams and the telltale whine of an engine powering down. The helicarrier listed perilously to the side.

“Stark! Get that engine online, NOW!” Fury bellowed into his earpiece.

Clint fought his way through to the man. “I’m going after Hill,” he shouted, and bolted before Fury could order him back. His earpiece crackled to life before he got five steps away, and he tore it out and shoved it in his pocket. Fury could bark orders all he liked, but Clint was not going to let Maria get out of here. He’d already failed her once; it had been his request that Fury replace him with her on babysitting duty for Selvig and his flying monkeys. He’d been trying to get on active duty so Fury wouldn’t have as much time to grill Clint about Tasha’s whereabouts. It was his fault.

Clint had spent enough time on this ship by now to know its secret ways. He vaulted up three stories through the rafters and support beams near the hull of the bridge rather than run a hundred meters down to the stairwell, and came out on the maintenance catwalk that accessed the viewing portals Maria had used.

It was silent. Empty.

Clint narrowed his eyes. It was dark up here, and silent. All these catwalks echoed and rattled with the slightest footstep, unless it was Tasha’s footstep, in which case they were silent. But Tasha wasn’t up here; she would be off helping someone else, and it was Maria he needed.

Clint crept along the catwalk.

A flicker of motion was his only warning. He barely had time to flex his abs before a pair of boots slammed into his stomach and sent him flying back along the catwalk. He flipped and was back on
his feet in seconds, in time to block a flurry of vicious blows.

Maria disengaged and danced backwards, away from his counterstrike.

For a charged moment, he met her eyes across the feet between them. Glacial blue, not their normal warm dark brown. Just like the color of the gem in the scepter.

“Maria,” he said.

He had just enough time to register the utter lack of recognition on her face before she attacked him, moving like she meant to kill.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

The first blow punched a hole in the wall.

Mjolnir (Darcy could pronounce the name just fine, but did it wrong on purpose just to piss Thor off) swung right for Loki’s head. Darcy’s heart jumped to her throat but Loki dodged and the hammer smashed through three inches of steel without pause.

Loki spun and lashed out with a knife pulled from somewhere in his armor, but Thor dodged with a speed that seemed unnatural for his size and caught the blade on the metal thing covering his forearm.

They fought faster than Darcy’s eyes could follow, exchanging blows that would send any normal man to the ground.

And neither of them was obviously winning.

Darcy squinted at Loki. She was no fighting expert but it seemed like he had some kind of plan - like he was leading Thor somewhere.

She tensed, ready to fling herself out of the viewing room, but Loki’s words came back to her: “I won’t be permitted to spare you if you interfere. ”

Permitted. But whose orders could he possibly be taking?

Darcy realized she was biting her lip and made herself stop. She wanted to help Thor - she knew Loki couldn’t go free - but she also knew she’d probably die if she went out there. And Darcy Lewis was many things, but suicidal was not one of them.

That was when she looked up and realized the cameras were still off.

Shit. No one would be coming.

And… no one was watching, either.

Darcy realized she was the only record of what was happening here, and so she pressed close to the window, focusing intently on the combatants.
A male voice rang through the room. “Enough!”

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier
April 2011

Lungs burning, heart pounding, Natasha fled through the bowels of the helicarrier.

The Hulk followed, roaring, destroying everything in his path. She sprinted a set of stairs, swung off halfway up, and bolted in a crouch along a maintenance aisle. Its panels crumpled and smashed in her wake as she barely evaded one strike after another.

“This is Romanoff! Hulk in pursuit! I need backup!” she gasped into her comm.

No response.

“This is Romanoff. I need Hulk backup now. Does anybody cop-”

The floor gave way beneath her feet.

Natasha caught a support pipe on the way down and swung. She hurled herself to the side as the Hulk rammed a vicious chunk of rebar into the space she’d occupied less than a second before, displaying a speed incongruous with his size. Her feet hit the top of a boiler and she sprang from one to the next, slipping through the shadows close to the ceiling.

A hundred meters away, she paused and did an inventory.

The sounds of the Hulk were distant. Her pulse was faster than it should be for the level of exertion she’d just needed - likely from fear. She was bruised and her ankle was not happy; there were cuts on her left forearm from shattered glass and another one on the left side of her neck, but all were shallow and superficial. She’d been in far worse shape in her lifetime.

Her earpiece crackled. “Romanoff, you there?”

Fury.

She reached up and tapped out a message in Morse code on the earpiece, knowing it would transmit the impacts as bursts of static. It was an old-school trick, but she didn’t dare speak out loud.

Blr rm. Hulk smwhere near, hunting. Need bckup now.

His voice came through a second later. “Can you draw him up to the wishbone? Tap once for yes, twice for no.”

She envisioned the route she’d have to take as she crept through the shadows, pistol in hand and heart hammering. Then tapped once.

“I’ll send one of the escort pilots to meet you. Get him to a window and get out of the way.”

Copy, she tapped out, and braced both hands on her weapon.

The only sounds in the ship’s guts were the rattle of machinery and the hiss of her breathing.
Natasha steadied her lungs and heart, forcing the fear away. If nothing else, she had to survive, because she was so close to finding her Soldier. Weeks away from the first concrete lead in decades.

You will survive this. You will see him again.

She bent, tugged a knife out of her boot - they wouldn’t do much good on the Hulk’s skin anyway - and threw it as hard as she could to her left.

Its ping was devastatingly loud.

An answering roar came from deep inside the hull.

Natasha moved swiftly away from the sound, knowing she’d have to draw him after her but stay hidden long enough to find her way out. She and Clint had spent enough time scrambling through the secret spaces of the helicarrier that she knew more or less where she was -

There. A familiar control panel, followed by a glassed-in walkway, designed as a protected exit in case of fire.

She took a deep breath.

The Hulk lunged out of the pipes to her left.

Natasha fired three times - the rounds did nothing but anger him - and ran for her life, and her Soldier’s.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier
April 2011

Tony lasered a chunk of debris in half and wrapped his gauntlets around it.

“How do those relays look?”

“Well, they seem to run on some form of electricity,” Steve said, sounding exasperated.

Tony snorted. “Well, you’re not wrong.”

He had JARVIS talk the Captain through checking the relays while Tony focused on kicking debris out of the way. The largest chunk was wedged between the rotor and the edge of the turbine. He oriented himself above it, disengaged all thrusters, and fell boots-first onto the sheet metal; it tore free with a screech that was audible even over the wind and tumbled toward the coast below. Fury had managed to swing them toward the ocean, then. Tony just hoped he could get this turbine going before they belly-flopped into the water.

“Okay, the relays are intact. What now?” Steve asked.

“Uh…”

Tony examined the rotors, using facial cues to flick through his HUD. The results were not promising.
“This thing won’t get going again without a jump-start. I’m gonna have to get in there and push.”

“Stark, you’ll get shredded.”

“They ought to rename you Captain Obvious,” Tony said irritably. “I know that. Which is why I need you to stay in the control unit and reverse polarity long enough to disengage mag-lev boosting power—”

“Speak English!” Steve snapped.

Tony flicked a blueprint of the gutted engine room over his screen. Thank God the lever was still there. “There should be a red lever a level up from the relays. When I say, pull it; it’ll slow the rotors down long enough for me to get out.” He paused, scanning the calculations done by JARVIS. “Probably. There’s a fifty-two percent chance it’ll work.”

“That’s too low.”

“So is this ship! I’m the one risking my skin here. Get to the goddamn lever!” Tony snapped.

“On it.” Steve paused. “Stark. I was wrong about you.”

“Lots of people are.” Tony swiveled his palms, adjusted thruster output, and swung into position against one of the massive turbine blades. “Ready…and…initiating. All power to ventral thrusters, JARVIS.”

The pressure by his feet increased with a roar, and Tony bared his teeth as the rotor groaned into motion.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

Clint had four inches and forty pounds at least on Maria, but he was losing this fight.

The biggest problem was that he was limited to nonlethal strikes, while she was clearly out for blood.

His hand was bleeding from a bite she’d given him; his throat throbbed from an incompletely blocked trachea chop that might have crushed his windpipe with a little more force. Maria had bounced back and was waiting, calm and sure of her victory.

Tasha’s voice came back to Clint in a rush. “What do you do when you’re losing a fight?”

“What?” he’d asked.

She’d smiled. “Make them think you’re done.”

Maria sprang.

Clint was a little too slow, a little too late, as she got him in a vicious lock, weight leveraged brutally against the railing.

He gritted his teeth and prayed the doctors would be able to fix this.
Clint struggled, struggled, and pretended to go limp.

Maria’s grip loosened a fraction.

He swung his hand up and back and smashed it into her temple. She fell away from his back instantly, hitting her head against the railing on the way down.

Clint paused, breathing hard, and watched her struggle to her knees.

Maria turned and looked at him, and the woman he knew was back in her face as she breathed, “Clint?”

Her eyes were glacial blue.

Clint lashed out with all the speed he could muster and clocked her on the temple again.

Maria collapsed.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

“Get out of the way,” Thor advised Coulson, not daring to remove his eyes from Loki. “We have been allies in the past, Son of Coul, but I cannot guarantee your safety.”

Loki paused, dividing his attention between Thor and the Midgardian male with the glowing projectile weapon. So crude and ignoble, these people and their “guns”. Better to fight with an honest blade or hammer.

“Thor. We’re on the same side,” Coulson said. “My name is Agent Coulson.”

“Coulson,” Loki repeated. “You were in the facility with Selvig. He thinks highly of you.”

“And I of him,” the Midgardian replied tightly. “I’d like him back, please.”

Loki smirked. “Unfortunately, that is not possible at present. I need him, you see.”

“Then I’ll settle for you back in that cage,” Coulson said.

“No,” Thor ordered. “Loki comes with me, to Asgard, where he belongs.”

“Sorry,” Coulson said, not sounding very apologetic. “We still need him.”

“The Tesseract?” Thor mocked. “Tis an object of immense power with the potential to destroy worlds. Midgardians have no place near it. You will yield it to me along with this criminal, and your realm will be at peace.”

“No,” Coulson insisted, pointing the weapon at Loki. “Step back in the glass, please.”

Loki considered the weapon and took a slow step toward the containment unit.

“Stop,” Thor ordered, taking a step toward Coulson.
The Midgardian tensed and moved away, keeping the weapon trained on Loki but his eyes on Thor.

“Coulson, do as I say,” Thor snapped. This was ridiculous. He was Crown Prince of Asgard, and only trying to protect them! Why couldn’t any of the imbecilic Midgardians recognize that they would be far better off leaving the Tesseract and Loki to Asgard’s more advanced society?

Coulson glanced at Loki then looked back at Thor. “I do not take orders from you, Thor. You’re a guest but you are no part of the internal hierarchy of my organization. Technically, I outrank you. I need you to step away.”

“By the Norns,” Thor snapped. He’d have to take care of this himself.

He had fought Stark and Rogers, who were both enhanced and could at least hold out for some time against an Asgardian warrior, but a typical Midgardian? Pah. Slow and useless. He’d be able to eliminate Coulson in one blow.

Thor tensed, readied himself, and struck.

Coulson spun and shot his weapon with deadly accuracy.

Rage burst through Thor - this once-ally had dared fire upon a Prince of Asgard! - as he deflected the shot deftly with Mjolnir, sprang, and shoved Coulson backward.

The man flew through the air, twisting to catch himself against the wall, and slammed into a shattered metal beam left from an earlier hammer blow.

The metal punctured his chest.

Coulson’s mouth gaped wide and soundless, blood appearing at the corner of his lips. Thor stared.

“That’s… not…” he muttered, unsure who he was speaking to.

Loki’s dark chuckle brought him to attention.

“Bravo, brother,” he sneered. “Now you’ve killed your ally. Pinned to the wall like the Midgardians do to insects. I believe they call that irony.”

“He’s not dead,” Thor protested.

Loki rolled his eyes, still standing near the Midgardians’ flimsy cage. “He will be. After the chaos I’ve created, it will be long past his expiration before anyone thinks to send a medical team.” His eyes slid off to the side at one of the walls to Thor’s left, opposite Coulson.

Thor’s rage eclipsed that oddity. “I will not stand for this!” he bellowed, and charged at Loki.

His brother crouched to meet the rush. Thor placed his feet with the ease of centuries of experience in combat, positioned perfectly to take Loki down and pin his arms-

He flew headfirst through the illusion and skidded through the glass cage. The door hissed shut behind him.

“Are you ever not going to fall for that?” Loki asked, sounding genuinely disappointed.

“Loki!” Thor howled, barely aware that he was spitting as he shouted.

Loki was standing with a smirk by the control unit. “Director Fury explained how this system
works,” he said pensively. “It’s interesting, really. One press of a button…” He traced the outline of
the glass screen. “You’ll fall… fifty thousand? Feet, yes, the Midgardian measuring system used in
this nation. Although I believe it to be about half that; we’ve been dropping for some time now. Two
engines are not enough to keep this craft aloft.”

“What have you done?” Thor growled.

Loki shrugged gracefully. “What I must.” Had he glanced at the wall - no, that door in the corner.
An escape route, perhaps.

Loki and Thor regarded one another for a long moment through the glass. Thor felt every year of
their shared history swimming between them: an idyllic childhood; the chasm that grew as Loki
pursued seidr and Thor the title Warrior Prince, as Loki became Odin’s spy and diplomat while Thor
was the future king and the noble warrior. Loki’s talents were useful, to be sure, but Thor found
them distasteful. War should be fought bloody and up-close and with all the honest strength of a
warrior, not with magic or Loki’s strange slashing fighting style, and definitely not avoided with
useless treaties that would only be broken at some point in the future. Better to crush an opponent
than make peace, and do it nobly.

And now this. They’d once been as close as brothers, until the truth of Loki’s heritage came out.

“Show me,” Thor said suddenly.

Loki blinked, his hand halting its slow path toward the button. “What?”

“You are a Jotun, correct?” Thor demanded. “I want to see what you look like.”

Loki cocked his head. “And why, precisely, would I acquiesce to any of your desires?”

Thor struggled for words. At last, he growled, “As a favor to the vanquished.”

It tasted bitter in his mouth. But he was not vanquished, and he could compromise a bit of his pride if
it meant he would finally get to see the truth for himself.

Loki smirked, as Thor knew he would. His little brother had always been too proud and too arrogant
for his own good. “Very well.”

And with a flicker of seidr , his skin began to change.

Pale flesh-tones cooled to shades of blue; the intricate epidermal traceries that marked Frost Giants’
skin spiderwebbed out from Loki’s hands and eyes to cover all his skin that was visible to Thor.
And, Norns, his eyes . They changed from blue to a vicious, monstrous red.

Thor recoiled in disgust.

Loki’s face darkened and he pulled the guise of the pale Asgardian prince over his features once
again. “Now you see,” he said distantly. “I am one of the monsters you once swore to slay.”

“Jotun,” Thor spat. "You've failed. This fall will not kill me. This cage will not contain me."

Loki’s eyes were colder than they’d ever been, and blue once more. “The Midgardians think us
immortal,” he mused. "Shall we test that?"

He pressed the button, and Thor fell.
“Fury, you better have that escort ready!” Natasha shouted.

Her earpiece crackled. She almost missed his reply in the chaos of smashing and crashing that accompanied the furious Hulk on her heels. “He’s waiting.”

“Almost there.”

Natasha was so close. Up this hall, turn right, bolt out into the common room by the windows-

She tripped and went down.

The Hulk roared victory and attacked with blinding speed. Natasha barely dodged one devastating blow, then another, desperately trying to get past him and back on track.

Natasha screamed, a rough and visceral sound that tore her throat, and charged the Hulk.

He hesitated for the barest second, caught off guard by the absolute stupidity of the move. It was enough. Natasha dove and slid past his ankles, nailing his Achilles tendon with her widow cuffs on the way by.

The Hulk bellowed again and smashed at the floor. Natasha rolled aside, scrambled to her feet, and started running again. Her left side was one massive ache and there was blood dripping down her neck; her ankle howled with every step.

She hurled herself around the corner, rebounding off the opposite wall of the new corridor rather than slow down. The impact jarred her shoulder and her aching left ribs but she ignored the pain and kept running. The swinging doors to the common room were ahead of her, the Hulk’s thundering footsteps behind.

Natasha slammed through the doors and flung herself across the common room’s slick floor.

Machine gun fire shattered the broad windows.

She watched in disbelief from off to the side as the Hulk spun, distracted, and bellowed at the escort hovering in the wishbone.

“Romanoff! Status?”

“Alive,” Natasha said.

The Hulk roared again, hand raised, and charged the escort. The windows were gone, and he leaped in one impossibly powerful spring onto the plane. The escort spun out of control, spitting bullets across the inside of the wishbone, and vanished beneath the helicarrier.

Natasha took what felt like her first breath in a long time.
April 2011

Steve clung to the wall near the red lever, apprehension twisting like a snake in his stomach.

He’d been wrong to think Stark was nothing but an arrogant, narcissistic playboy. And now the man might die.

Steve swallowed his anger. As far as he was concerned, this chaos was in part Fury’s fault. If the man hadn’t been keeping secrets, the team would’ve been on alert and more ready for an attack.

Save it. Right now you have bigger problems.

If there was anything Steve hated, it was feeling helpless, but right now there was nothing he could do for Stark, although the plan seemed to be working: the whine of the rotor was increasing, and the helicarrier had stopped listing so dangerously.

Distantly, over the wind, he heard the pressure door hiss open. Three of Loki’s men with face masks, machine guns, and body armor stepped out into the exposed remains of the engine room.

Steve hesitated. They hadn’t seen him yet; if he could just get enough time to-

One of the men pulled something off his body armor and chucked it at the engine.

Steve reacted on instinct. He sprang up and over the railing and launched himself across the open space, swatting the grenade away with one hand and slamming into the shattered catwalk on the other side. The explosion took one of the men with him, tumbling into the void of sky and sea below.

The other two opened fire with their rifles.

Steve thought words that would’ve made his mom wash his mouth out with soap when he was a little kid. Bullets pinged and ricocheted around him as he ducked and dodged his way along the catwalk.

Two left. One by the door, another over by the lever.

Steve flung himself back across the catwalk. A bullet rebounded off his reinforced chest plate; another grazed his left arm and tore the fabric. Then he slammed into the soldier with a crunch of bone - not Steve’s - and the man went limp.

More bullets.

Steve rolled blindly away from the onslaught, ready to stand - he was so close - but there was no ground beneath his feet.

Steve’s stomach twisted sickeningly as the world fell away and he began to drop.

With one hand, he lashed out and caught a trailing metal cable. The wind slammed him against the outer hull of the helicarrier. Debris from the ruined edge of the engine room dug into his body. Bullets pinged off the metal near his feet and Steve hauled himself up one torturous foot, then another - and suddenly, he was on a train, looking at another man clinging to a piece of twisted metal above a deadly fall.
No.

“Cap,” Stark said. “Need the lever.”

He sounded urgent.

“Need a minute here,” Steve ground out, forcing himself to focus on the here and now.

“Lever,” Stark warned, even more intense. “Now.”

There was a pause. The lever mocked Steve, six feet out of his reach.

Then an ominous “Uh-oh,” came through the comms.

Steve yelled as he hauled himself up hand over hand, feeling another bullet burn its way past his right thigh, and collapsed on the catwalk. The metal below his feet offered some protection but it was rapidly becoming too porous to provide proper cover as nonstop machine gun fire tore it to pieces.

Steve got a hand on the lever and jerked it ninety degrees down.

Seconds later, the very battered Iron Man flew in with an anemic mechanical whine and slammed into the soldier below.

The bullets stopped, and Steve pushed himself to his feet with a groan, making his way down to where Stark lay.

The suit was so damaged that Stark didn’t appear able to move, or perhaps he was injured. Steve fell to a knee next to the fallen scientist’s side. “Stark, can you hear me?”


Steve gave the arc reactor in Stark’s chest a single hard overhead blow.

The blueish glow immediately brightened, and Stark’s helmet fell apart with a hiss seconds later, releasing his skull. Steve did a soldier’s injury scan and noted several cuts and bruises leaving blood and shadowed patches all over Stark’s head.

“Guess fifty-two percent was enough,” he said with a manic grin.

Steve couldn’t resist an exhausted chuckle.

He might’ve lost Bucky, but it seemed there were other decent battle partners in the world.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

Darcy’s glasses were slipping down her face, but she didn’t dare move.

Thor was gone. Coulson was injured. And Loki was - there was something off...

She felt like she was trying to dredge up the memory of a dream. It wasn’t working well.
She chalked the weird feeling up to déjà vu of watching Thor fight in Puente Antiguo.

Darcy remembered Coulson from Puente Antiguo, too. He was a good man, pragmatic and logical but also kind. And he had a good sense of humor when he wanted to. She’d learned that in the weeks Jane worked with SHIELD after the Destroyer played patty cake with buildings. Darcy liked him a hell of a lot better than Fury, that was for sure.

And now Thor had made him into a fucking shish kebab.

Loki turned away from the console and started for the door.

“You’re gonna lose.”

Both Darcy and Loki snapped their heads over at Coulson. His words were faint but clear; his eyes were open and fixed on Loki.

Loki sneered. “Your heroes are scattered. Your floating fortress falls from the sky. Tell me, where is my disadvantage?”

“You lack conviction.”

Darcy couldn’t see Loki’s face very well; he was turned mostly away from her. But she still caught the twitch that ever-so-briefly crossed his face.

“I don’t think I lack conviction,” he snapped defensively.

Coulson just smiled and closed his eyes.

Loki reached abruptly for the man, but then Darcy saw a tremor shake his limbs, and he turned and practically ran from the room.

“What the fuck?” she asked the empty viewing closet.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter ended up being really long, like I was afraid of. Sorry for the irregular length of these things. I wanted to do the whole battle at once since it's a lot of little short scenes and everything was happening more or less at the same time.

Thanks to everyone who is reading! Extra thanks for the kudos and comments!

(Update: We had some interesting points raised in the comments about characterization and the pairings I've chosen for this fic, to which I replied with an unnecessarily long and detailed character analysis of Jane, Loki, and Darcy. So if anyone's interested, that's in the comments. Look for the one with a *lot* of words. :D)
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

Fury ran through the bowels of the ship. A low thrum of worry sat in his stomach, but he ignored it and focused on his stride. He’d left the bridge at a sprint when the alert for the dropped containment unit flashed on his screen, leaving Lang in charge. Fury knew perfectly well that Barton, Hill, and Romanoff would all have been better choices - they improvised rather than following orders to the letter - but he didn’t exactly trust Romanoff at the moment, Hill was down, and Barton was busy. So Fury’d gone after the closest thing he had to a friend.

Coulson. His one good eye was down in the containment unit.

Fury skidded around the corner. His heart pounded irregularly when he saw the door, hanging off its hinges. And blasted - in?

He slid to a stop in the howling containment unit. The hole in the floor had sealed in the glass enclosure’s wake and the air pressure was back to normal and Darcy Lewis, of all people, was clutching Coulson’s hand.

Coulson was impaled on a broken piece of rebar.

She looked up when she saw him, face streaked with tears. “Thank God!”

“Miss Lewis?” he asked incredulously.

“I called a paramedic team,” she said, voice unsteady. “He - Coulson - said there was a panel over there.” She gestured vaguely toward the observation rooms, where there was indeed a medical call panel. “They’ll be here soon.”

Sure enough, boots were pounding two levels up on the catwalks.

“Get out,” Fury snapped. “Wait for me two levels up.”

Darcy nodded her wet face and left, hugging her stomach. She was a civvie; she’d probably never seen such a wound before.

Coulson was barely conscious. “Sorry… boss,” he whispered. “He got me.”

“Who?” Fury asked.

Coulson’s eyes flickered. “Thor.”

Thor?

“Was fighting… Loki. Tried to… get Loki back in the cell. Thor swatted me aside. And…”

“Stay awake,” Fury ordered. “Eyes on me.” His mind was spinning. Loki must’ve escaped somehow, either through his powers or from the virus Hill hit the bridge with, and Thor arrived in
time to fight them. Probably Thor got insulted when Coulson tried to intervene, smacked him out of the way, and this unfortunate happened. But where was Thor? Who had been in the cage when it fell?


“You’re not going anywhere,” Fury ordered, but he knew it was futile. The medical team skidded into place around him, shouting things about shock and blood loss, but Coulson kept his eyes on Fury’s one.

“Clocking out here.”

“Not an option,” Fury insisted.

Coulson shook his head. “It’s okay, boss. Use… it. This was… never gonna work unless… they had something - to…”

His voice trailed off.

Fury had seen enough men fall in battle to recognize the moment life left his old friend’s eyes.

He stepped back and closed his eyes, letting the paramedics cluster around Coulson’s body. They were trying something with a defibrillator, possibly, but Fury knew it was useless.

Coulson was gone.

Unless…

Fury filed that away for later and pressed a hand to his comm. “Coulson is down.”

“What?”

Rogers. Stark was on the line a second later, demanding to know what had happened.

“I’ll brief you in the bridge,” Fury said, deliberately sounding exhausted. “Get Romanoff there too, Barton if you can track him down.”

A pause, then Rogers said, “Copy that” and Fury turned off his earpiece.

He couldn’t tell the team this was Thor’s fault. He was the single strongest person on the force leveled against the alien invasion that was to come, and Romanoff, Stark, Rogers, and Foster would all have a grudge against Thor. Probably refuse to work with him anymore. And that was not an option.

Which left one more question: what had Lewis seen?

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

Darcy watched Fury approach with no small amount of nervousness.

She kept her face crumply and the fake tears coming, a trick she’d learned for eliciting pity from her
dad. It was the easiest way to make him go away when he was drunk; only that would snap him out of his rages and stagger off to beat the shit out of the couch in the backyard. Or something.

Although there’d been times when she’d taken his anger just to protect Lizzie.

Not that it had done much good.

Darcy shoved those thoughts away before they ruined her control and made sure she looked appropriately nauseated. It wasn’t all that hard, honestly. She’d seen her fair share of gory horror movies, but it was different in real life. Her tummy was feeling a little ticked.

“Miss Lewis,” Fury greeted her.

“Director,” she got out.

He eyed her. “What, exactly, were you doing down here?”

*Jesus, no kid gloves.* “I was looking for Jane,” she said. “When… when the explosion hit. And… I heard the PA… some guy saying the people who invaded were wearing SHIELD gear. I saw some guys with guns and I ran because I didn’t know who they were. I got lost and ended up down here. Loki was… leaving.” She shuddered. “I hid, and then I heard Mr. Coulson groaning and followed the sound. So he had me call the paramedic team, and then I stayed. It didn’t feel… I didn’t want to leave him.” Darcy let out a hiccuping sob and ordered another wave of tears to pour down her face.

Fury remained stoic, but she strongly suspected he was both uncomfortable around the weeping and also not totally buying her story. That was fine. She could always revise it later, and she knew there weren’t a lot of cameras in the corridors; it was too power-expensive to run many in nonessential or non-restricted areas. They’d never be able to really fact-check her. And Coulson was gone - she’d heard them saying so. And Thor had never seen her.

“Did… did he say what happened?” Darcy asked in a shaky voice.

*Ease up there, Darce. Laying it on a little thick.* But Fury seemed to be buying it at last; a tiny bit of tension trickled out of his shoulders. “Loki tricked Thor into falling down the containment chute,” Fury said quietly. “Then Loki killed Coulson for trying to stop his escape.”

Darcy didn’t think she quite managed to hide her surprise. Well, *shock* would be a better word. The lie was so ballsy - but then again, there was no one to cross-check him.

And if that was his story, she’d have to be careful about telling the truth. But she also had to tell the truth. Thor was generally an asshole, but this was *way* too far.

“I hope you catch him,” Darcy said. “Loki, I mean. And - is there a way of reaching Thor? To make sure he’s okay? That thing was meant for the Hulk.”

“We’ll find them,” Fury said wearily. “For now, you should go back to the civilian quarters. I’m evacuating you and Dr. Foster to Stark Tower. They’ve got state-of-the-art security and it’s less of a target for Loki than this thing. You’ll have better tech to track the cube.”

“What about Banner and Stark? Isn’t that their job too?”

“Banner’s gone. He hulked out, ripped a hole through the middle of my ship, and busted out the window on an escort. Stark stays here. He’s combat-ready. You and Foster aren’t. Miss Lewis, this is a military operation, and while you are onboard you follow my orders, understand?”
“Yes, of course,” she stuttered. “Look, I’m sorry, I’m not a military girl, I didn’t mean to question you, I was just—”

He softened a fraction. “No hard feelings. Go up these stairs, turn left, and tell the first person you see that Fury said you need a guide to civilian quarters. Dr. Foster will be there in the protected areas. I’ll send someone to take you to the hangar bay shortly after.”

“Thank you, Director,” she said with a watery smile, and left him.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

Fury watched Lewis go with a frown on his face.

She was good, he’d give her that. But the woman knew more than she was saying. Most people would’ve been fooled by her sob routine, but Fury had decades of reading people’s secrets under his belt, and she was definitely hiding something.

Lewis had just become a significant liability.

Fury’s mind worked furiously. Stark Tower - he had to send Foster to keep the “evacuating civilians” story secure, but he needed her alive. She was too good to lose. Lewis, though… Lewis had to be dealt with.

Fury strode away. Not toward the bridge. He had to contact an ally, and he had to do it where no one would see.

Chapter End Notes

NOTICE: There has been an update made to Ch. 8, "A Different Call," for the sake of plot coherency. It's at the end of the chapter, just an extended bit of dialogue, that explains the well-known "Just like Budapest all over again" line. Not a vital thing, but if anyone was curious, it's there!
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

Tony didn’t want to be having this meeting.

His body felt like one massive goddamn bruise, and he had two fractured fingers. The digits on his suit had the least structural integrity; he’d had to compromise some armor to maintain mobility. Tony made a note to figure out how to strengthen the alloy there, and also that he had to go get a new suit. The Mark VII was ready and waiting back at the Tower, but no way would Fury let him go get it.

And then there was Coulson.

Tony sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“You good, Stark?”

Tony glanced at Rogers. “Yep.”

Rogers nodded once and fell into silence once more.

They were waiting on Fury and Natasha at the conference table above the bridge. Below them, the SHIELD personnel were scrambling to get the virus fixed and their equipment up and running. Navigation and communication were both completely fried; from the sound of it, staying in the air was in itself a challenge, much less getting anywhere. Tony supposed he should help them, but right now he was definitely feeling the impact of too many fights and not enough sleep. And also like he did not want to help SHIELD at all.

“Did you know him?” he asked abruptly.

“Coulson?”

“Yeah.”

Rogers sighed. “Not well. I’ve not been awake much, and he’s been busy. On…”

“Widow Watch,” Tony said, and laughed without amusement. “Sounds like Fury doesn’t trust any of us as far as he could throw this helicarrier.”

They lapsed back into silence. Tony sneaked glances at Rogers, who was examining the big bay windows with a faraway expression. This man was disorientingly different and similar from the one in Tony’s dad’s stories. That Captain America had been tediously noble, lawful good all the way, America’s golden boy. This man was inherently good, but - Tony got the sense that he was nearing a breaking point of some kind, and also that the “lawful” was maybe more “neutral”. He’d do what he had to to get what he wanted, and what he wanted - that was the real question.

Fury marched in, snapping Tony out of it.

“Romanoff?”
“No sign of her,” Rogers reported.

Fury grimaced. “She’ll-”

“Here, sir.”

Natasha slipped in the door in Fury’s wake, looking bloody, dusty, and exhausted.

“What happened to you? Interesting hairstyle, by the way,” Tony drawled.

She shot him an irritated look as she sat down across from Rogers. “I had a spat with the Hulk.”

Tony whistled. “And survived. Impressive.” He glanced at Fury. “Is this where you tell us what the hell happened?”

Fury sighed. “Coulson was the only available resource I could dispatch to the containment unit. He took a Phase 2 prototype - yes, Rogers, from the weapons arsenal we were building with the Tesseract - to control Loki. Thor beat him there. Coulson told me, before he died, that he arrived just in time to see Loki flush Thor out the containment tube. He tried to stop Loki, but Loki killed him and then escaped. The scepter is gone, Banner is gone, and we have no way of tracking either at the moment. Communications are down; so are navigation and propulsion. We’re dead in the water.”

“Well, that’s just great,” Tony muttered.

“On the upside, we got Hill back. Barton’s with her. It seems that cognitive recalibration is enough to snap someone out of Loki’s control, although it’s dangerous - there’s significant risk of brain trauma.”

Natasha relaxed a tiny, tiny fraction.

There was a long moment of silence. Rogers was the first to break it. “What now?”

“We rebuild.” Fury looked determined. “We rebuild, we get communications online, we find that cube, and we stop Loki.”

No one answered.

At last, Fury sighed. “Fine. Yes, we were going to build an arsenal with the Tesseract. I never put all my chips on that number though, because I was playing something even riskier.” He paused. “There was an idea - Stark… knows this - called the Avengers Initiative. The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people, see if they could become something more. See if they could work together when we needed them to, to fight the battles that we never could. Phil Coulson died still believing in that idea, in heroes.”

Tony stood up and walked out of the meeting.

It was too much. Fury had lied, and Banner was gone, and the helicarrier was down, and Coulson was dead.

He was a good man. The good people weren’t supposed to die.

Tony was suddenly and overwhelmingly furious with himself. He should’ve known better than this. He shouldn’t be so fucking naive.

Sometimes the good guys don’t win.
Slowly, slowly, Tony’s fingers clenched into fists.

Maybe it was time to not be a good guy anymore.

Where had it gotten him, anyway? Mocked by his fellow businessmen, ridiculed and shunned by all his old social circle. Pepper was the only one who’d stuck by him, the only one who’d believed in him and tried to help him be better. Who’d been convinced he could change even when he had his doubts.

Tony glared down the corridor, walking without knowing where he was going, barely noticing how people got out of his way. He was done. Done trusting the wrong people, done relying on anyone else. He’d be following his own code from now on, his own orders, or those of someone he trusted. Sure as hell not Fury’s. He would stand by his people and do what he wanted, and the world would move out of his way.

He was Tony fucking Stark, after all.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

Natasha stood up shortly after Tony did. “Where’s Clint?”

“Med bay,” Fury responded. “Before you go find him, I need you to put Foster and Lewis and the other civvies on a Quinjet to Stark Tower. It’s a lower profile target and they’ll be safer. If this is any model to go by, they’ll only be liabilities in the real fight.”

“Yes, sir,” Romanoff said, and left.

Fury sighed. “I suppose heroes are a bit old-fashioned,” he said bitterly. “You’d know.”

Steve looked at the tired man for a long moment. “No,” he said at last. “I don’t think I do.” I don’t think I am one. Not anymore. I gave everything I had and then some for this world, and from now on I get to choose.

But he couldn’t say that. Not when Fury already didn’t trust him, already had proven that beyond a doubt by keeping him in a coma until he was needed. Steve gritted his teeth and left Fury in the ruins of the bridge.

He found Stark in the containment unit, staring blankly at the space the cell used to occupy.

“Was he married?” Steve asked.

“There was a cellist,” Stark said tightly. “In Portland.” He turned abruptly to Steve. “Did you notice the cameras in here are all down?”

“What?”

“The cameras,” Stark repeated impatiently, gesturing at the ceiling. “They have red lights when they’re active. Every single one in here is down. There’s no footage. Fury could be hiding anything.”

“What is there to lie about?” Steve asked doubtfully.
Stark laughed. It was a hollow sound. “His secrets have secrets, remember? He could be lying about anything. We already know he will.”

“You’re too suspicious for your own good.”

“We balance out, then. You’re too trusting.”

“Not anymore,” Steve muttered.

Stark’s lips quirked. “Always entertaining to watch naïveté die.”

“Coulson seemed like a good man,” Steve said, remembering what he’d come here to say.

“He was an idiot,” Stark said, but it came out jerky, and Steve knew it was a lie.

“For believing?”

“For taking on Loki alone.”

“He was doing his job.”

“He should’ve waited! He should’ve-” Stark broke off, breathing harder than he had been a moment ago.

Steve examined the scientist. “Is the first time you’ve lost a soldier?”

Stark snapped. “We are not soldiers! And I am not marching to Fury’s fife!”

“Neither am I,” Steve said.

Stark turned to glare at him. “If you’re just saying that to get me to cooperate, Rogers, I swear…”

Steve shook his head. “No. I’m being honest. That doesn’t mean we can’t work with Fury long enough to take Loki down. We’ll get him. He’s killed too many people.”

“Yeah, and he made it personal,” Stark said darkly, glaring at the bloodstain on the wall.

“We can’t think like that,” Steve said, even though he didn’t believe the words. Making it personal limited soldiers’ effectiveness in battle; he knew that from experience. He had to remind Stark and himself of that fact.

“No, we have to,” Stark insisted suddenly. “That’s the point. That’s Loki’s point. This whole plan of his was idiotic. ‘Divide and conquer,’ sure, but-” He shook his head. “There’s better ways to have handled this. He wants attention, an audience - which is weird in itself, since Thor said he always preferred to work behind the scenes, but whatever-”

“Yeah, I caught that act in Stuttgart,” Steve said.

Stark shook his head, becoming more and more animated. Steve could see him latching onto this idea as a way out of his grief. “No, that was like - the preview. This is opening night; he wants action, he wants drama, he wants a monument to the skies with his name plastered - Son of a bitch.”

“What?” Steve asked in alarm, as Stark turned with blazing eyes and jumped down from the platform.

“Stark Tower,” Stark said. “He’s using my tower, my new power supply. Asshat. And - oh, fuck.”
His face was ashen suddenly. “Pepper’s there.”

“And Fury sent Darcy and Jane there,” Steve said suddenly.

Stark pointed at him. “Do not breathe a word of this to Fury. He’ll saddle us with babysitters and slow us down. I need to fix the suit to get me there, and you need a jet - we’re not too far away from New York.”

“I’ll try to get to the hangar bay, keep Darcy and Jane on board,” Steve said.

Stark shook his head. “They’ll be gone by now. Go track down Barton and Natasha, Hill if she’s well enough. Catch them up. We have to sneak out while the rest of the ship deals with repairs.”

“Meet me in the medbay as soon as possible,” Steve said. “Stark. Are you sure about this?”

“Sure as sure,” Stark said. “Also, call me Tony. You did save my life.”

“And you saved mine, so call me Steve,” he replied.

Stark - Tony - glanced back once while taking the stairs two at a time. “Deal.”

[Classified Location]

April 2011

He came to at the bottom of a crater.

Bruce bolted upright with a gasp from dreams (or maybe memories) of killing and falling. For a wild, endless moment he didn’t know who or what or where he was, and then it all came rushing back.

He sunk down onto the stones beneath him with a groan.

Little snippets were all he remembered from his time as the other guy. The boiler room, and - Natasha had been there? He’d been chasing someone with red hair… and then an image of the sky and the accompanying knowledge that he was on a smaller aircraft, infuriated, tearing it to pieces. And then falling.

I hope I didn’t kill her.

“Ya fell outta the sky.”

Bruce jerked toward the voice.

An older man in a worn uniform of some kind stared down at him from the top of a crater of shattered glass and concrete and metal and earth.

Bruce paused, but the man didn’t seem perturbed.

“Did I hurt anybody?” he asked. That was the question. Always the first one he asked when he woke up. He just usually didn’t have the advantage of someone there to tell him.

“Nobody around here to get hurt,” the old man replied.

Bruce closed his eyes, crippling relief washing over his body. “Lucky.”
“Or good aim,” the man said. “You were awake when you fell.”

At that, Bruce twitched, eyes snapping open. “You saw?” *And you’re not screaming while you run? You’re not calling all the media?*

“Whole thing,” the man said. “Big and green and buck-ass nude. Here.”

A bundle thumped to the ground next to Bruce, who flinched before he realized it was clothes: pants and a shirt and a belt. “Didn’t think those’d fit ya till you shrunk down to a regular-size feller.”

Bruce hesitated, then reached over to the clothes. “Thanks.”

He had the pants on and was struggling with the belt when the old guy spoke again. “You an alien?”

“Huh?”

“An alien, like from outer space.” The man sounded impatient, and Bruce let out a rusty chuckle. If only this guy knew.

“No, I’m… no. From Earth.”

“Well then, son… you’ve got a condition,” the security guard said, nodding as if he was the wisest sage since Plato.

Bruce had to laugh.

When he at last climbed out of the pit, clothed in too-big hiking boots, too-short gray pants, and a shirt that was missing a button - he didn’t care, though; it was better than most of his post-blackout experiences - he paused and looked around.

It was a damn-well isolated area. Hills on one side and forests all around, with no roads or buildings in sight beyond the abandoned-looking one he’d demolished.

Very lucky indeed.

Or… was it possible that the old man was right, and the other guy had *aimed* for an unpopulated area?

No. The other guy was unchecked and unmitigated rage and destruction, nothing more. It was ridiculous. Impossible.

Tony’s words echoed in Bruce’s mind.

He narrowed his eyes. Maybe it had to do with intent? With wanting the other guy’s help, rather than accidentally changing when he was furious and in danger? Or possibly with the target of his emotions-

“Do you know where you’re goin’?” the old park ranger asked.

Bruce startled a bit. “Uh - do you know how I could get out of here? Transportation? I don’t want to call a service if I can help it.”

“Come with me,” the man said.

He led Bruce across the clearing around what Bruce thought was an old airplane hangar with an attached seating area, or something. There were traces of an abandoned runway in the grass that he
and his guide crossed, finding a worn track beneath the trees and setting off beneath their shadows.

In a quarter of a mile, they came out by an old but well-kept house in a clearing, surrounded by a garden and the signs of grandchildren.

Bruce felt a lump in his throat. “You live here?”

Pride gleamed on the old man’s face. “Sure do. My wife and I’ve lived here for twenty-four years. The grandkids came down for a few days during spring break. She took ‘em into town for ice cream.” He snorted. “Good thing, too, otherwise I’d have to explain this and I’m not sure I could.”

“You don’t want to know,” Bruce muttered.

“Probably not,” the old guy agreed. “C’mere.” He crossed the garden and walked in the back of a freestanding garage through a people-sized door. Bruce hesitated on the threshold, unsure, and then the old man stuck his head back out. “You comin’ or what?”

Cautiously, Bruce stepped inside.

The garage was dim but not dark, and cluttered; furniture and bicycles hung from the ceiling and disorganized workbenches and shelves lined the walls. It was big enough for three cars but only held one, a silhouette Bruce thought might be an old-model minivan, or possibly a Jeep. It was hard to tell.

The man laughed at Bruce’s expression. “I know. Been meaning to clean this place out for years, but it just never seemed that important.”

He picked his way through the stuff - Bruce couldn’t quite bring himself to think of it as junk - with the ease of long practice. Bruce himself was slower, careful to not knock anything over or disrupt this peaceful life any more than he already had.

“Here we are,” the old man said, heaving an old puttery-looking motorcycle out of the shadows.

Bruce stared at it. “You mean-”

“You can take this,” the man said, thrusting it forward so that Bruce had to take it or let it crash to the ground. “It was my son’s, but he-” Sadness crossed the man’s face. “He had a fall, years ago. Doctors said he had to give up the bikes, too risky to ride anymore. He sold most of ’em, but this one was one of his first. Built it with him. I couldn’t bear to junk it.”

“I can’t take this,” Bruce said.

The man waved his hand. “If you don’t, it’ll sit here gathering dust and get thrown on a junk pile once I’m gone. Might not be too much longer now. I’d rather it saw some use before that happens.”

Bruce stared and stared at the old man, who seemed perfectly content to sit and wait for a response. At last, he asked, “Why are you helping me?”

“I’m a good judge of people,” the old man said with a grin. It twinkled, and Bruce suddenly imagined with stark clarity exactly how much the grandkids must love this man; how he’d bounce them on his knees and tell frightening stories in the evenings and sing goofy songs around an outdoor fire on summer evenings. They would adore coming to this peaceful cabin in the woods, and they’d fight over his affection, for his attention.

Anger and grief welled up in Bruce in equal measures. Grief because this was a life he could have
had, in a different life, if his pride and stupidity hadn’t set him on this path where he was nothing but a wrecking ball. Anger at all the people who’d betrayed and shunned him over the years until he turned into somebody who couldn’t even want this life anymore.

And there was Bruce’s greatest secret, the thing he kept hidden from everyone and sometimes from himself: he didn’t hate what he was.

He wanted to. God, did he want to. But he couldn’t.

“Thank you,” he said softly, and took the motorcycle.

The old man rolled up the garage door and Bruce pushed the thing out into the sunlight, blinking. His guide lifted a dusty gas can and topped off the fuel tank, brushed off the seat, and handed Bruce the keys. “Here ya go.”

It took three tries before the ignition caught. Bruce squeezed the brakes and tested the throttle. The engine’s slightly putzy growl rose to fill the yard and then slackened off when he relaxed.

Stark Tower. That was where he’d have to go if he wanted to contact his team, and where they’d probably be headed. For a time, with Stark and Foster and Steve and even Romanoff, he’d felt useful. Needed for more than the other guy. There he might find camaraderie among the only people who might understand what it was to be broken, bitter, betrayed, and a monster that lashed out at everything around him.

Or he could run.

Bruce knew he could do it. He had years of practice. He could vanish on this ancient, unregistered bike into the wilds of Canada or the chaos of Central America, as he’d done before, and leave the world-saving to people who actually cared about what they were saving.

Even as Bruce had the thought, he knew he did care. For the innocents, at least.

But then again, he was a burden. To anyone, any team.

“Thank you,” he said, turning to the old man. “For… all this.”

“I like helping people,” the man said. “You seem to need it more’n most. Do you know where you’re goin’?”

Bruce examined the dirt driveway stretching out in front of him. “Yes,” he said, two futures spreading out in front of him. “Yes, I think I do.”

Chapter End Notes

ATTENTION: FEEDBACK REQUESTED

I do not know what is going to happen to Jane yet at this point in the story. Please comment with requests and rationales for who she might be paired with later (not Loki and not Thor, please; those are both out of consideration for other reasons) or no one, really. I request that you provide at least a basic description of why you think Jane would be good with whoever you’ve chosen so I can understand the reasoning. I’ll look through the comments to make my decision and update the tags accordingly. Thanks for
the help!
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

Tony attacked the Mark V.

He’d commandeered Fury’s engineering labs and chased three protesting SHIELD guys out. They could find other workspaces, and Tony needed these specialized tools.

He took a soldering gun to the cracks in the armor, creating ugly but effective repair jobs. He just needed a sealed carapace to make it to the tower, then he could retrieve the Mark VII and take Loki down.

Tony was going to told a repulsor to Loki’s head. He was going to either kill the Asgardian or throw him in a hole so deep he’d never crawl out. He was going to avenge Phil Coulson, who’d been more Pepper’s friend than Tony’s but a friend and a good man nevertheless. He was going to get payback for those people in Stuttgart and for Maria Hill.

Tony knew he wasn’t a hero. But maybe you didn’t have to be to get things done.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

Clint knew he shouldn’t be here. He should be in the bridge, helping Fury coordinate the repairs - he’d do a better job than Lang, that was for damn sure. But he wasn’t. And that was a problem.

Then again, this was Maria. Clint’s friend and - colleague, although neither word encompassed what Maria was to him. They’d gone through the SHIELD academy together and jockeyed for top spot the whole time. The competition had spawned some friction at first, but once they got out of the academy and weren’t in the exact same stream all the time, they’d gotten closer. Maria’s ambition and calculation were great complements for Clint’s more easygoing wing-it attitude; she focused on rising in the administration, where Fury recognized her potential and took her under his wing while Clint made a name for himself as a highly effective field agent, albeit one with a track record of ditching orders. They worked well together, and Maria’d overseen plenty of Clint and Natasha’s ops over the years.

Now she was lying unconscious and strapped to a gurney, sweating buckets and occasionally twisting and mumbling restlessly. Needless to say, Clint was concerned.

To hell with Fury and his orders. Clint was staying right here until he knew whether Maria would be all right.

He wiped her forehead, realized that his water pitcher was almost empty, and went to refill it.

When he stepped back into the room, Maria was sitting halfway upright, body rigid as a tree and
wide eyes staring at him.

“Maria,” he said, setting down the pitcher. “It’s okay. You’re gonna be fine.”

“You know that?” she whispered, laughing mockingly. “Is that what you know?”

“Yeah,” he said firmly.

Maria closed her eyes and slumped back down, shuddering. “I have to flush him out.”

“You’re fine. It’s fine. We have time.”

“No,” she said, turning to look at him again. Her expression was more normal this time, a trace of the focused, driven, intense woman he knew and - cared about reappearing. Clint hid his relief. “He’s going to make his move soon. Today.”

“Do you know where?” Clint asked.

She shook her head. “He didn’t… I didn’t need to know. They didn’t tell me.”

“Do you remember… much?” Clint asked.

Maria was trembling now, he saw, trembling all over. “You don’t know what it’s like, Clint. To be… unmade. To have someone else go in and… write over everything you are.”

“I do.”

Both Clint and Maria flinched, turning to stare at Natasha.

She stood in the doorway of the recovery room. “You don’t know who you are anymore. You don’t fully trust yourself; you always wonder if one day you’ll let down your guard and there the controls are again, waiting to take you over. You remember being controlled, being someone you’re not, wanting things you don’t and shouldn’t want, and it terrifies you.”

Maria was staring at Natasha. “Does it… does it ever get better?”

Natasha smiled faintly. “I find that revenge helps.”

“I suppose if I stuck a knife in Loki, I’d - sleep better, I suppose,” Maria said.

Natasha stepped around to her other side. She and Clint started undoing the restraints.

Clint didn’t know what to do with this new development. Natasha and Maria had always had a thin layer of I-don’t-fully-trust-you sitting in between them, which was why Clint usually went in for operational briefings. Maria couldn’t get past Natasha’s past and Tasha knew it.

He really, really hoped this was a good sign, and that Maria wouldn’t do what Maria often did after someone saw her vulnerable: shut down, shut them out, and act colder than ever. Tasha wouldn’t take that well. She didn’t bare herself like she’d just done lightly.

In fact, Clint had a sneaking suspicion that she’d done it for him.

Maria stood up slowly, testing her limbs, and winced. “I’m sore. And I need a change of clothes.”

“Here.” Tasha grabbed a backpack from the floor outside the small room. “Tactical suit and basic toiletries. Go change.”
“What now?” Maria asked.

Natasha quickly summarized the situation, softening nothing and leaving nothing out, a proper soldier’s report. Clint saw the news of Coulson’s death hit Maria like a blow - Phil had been like a father to her - and how she squared her shoulders and bore it.

Everyone in this room was made of steel inside.

“We don’t know what’s going on,” Clint said when Tasha was done. “We can’t talk to anyone until communications come back online, which means we also can’t track the cube. So… just be ready for anything, I guess.”

“I’ll go change,” Maria said. “And… freshen up, if I can.” She took two steps toward the attached bathroom and then hesitated, glancing at Tasha. “I… Thank you, Agent Romanoff.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow. “Clint here once told me that friends use first names. Maria.”

Maria nodded once, stepped into the bathroom, and closed the door. Clint heard the shower start up a second later.

His relief was crippling. His Maria was back, and she and Tasha were allying for the first time in all the years the three of them had worked together.

Now if only they could find Loki and wreak a little havoc, the better Clint would feel.

[Classified Location]. SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

Natasha slid a sideways look at Clint, taking in the absence of the tension that had gripped him since Hill - Maria - had been compromised. She was… happy for him, she realized. He cared a lot more about Maria, and Maria for him, than either of them would admit. Maybe now they’d get their chance.

Which meant she couldn’t take him with her to go after her Soldier.

Natasha realized that with a sick feeling that she hated instantly, because it meant she’d come to care. She’d found someone she would miss.

With a lurch, she realized she’d miss more than just Clint. Prickly Maria, cocky Stark, principled Rogers, the unassuming Banner - they were all kindred spirits, of a kind. All of them screwed up and bitter and broken so many times that they’d learned to rely only on themselves and a very few, very trusted companions. It was an uncomfortable epiphany.

Perhaps when she had her Soldier back, she’d keep in touch with these people. She didn’t think they would continue working for SHIELD. She and her Soldier would go their own way and do as they wished and paint Russia red with the blood of everyone who ever used them and manipulated them and kept them apart.

A small smile grew on her lips at the thought.

“How’d you get her back?” she asked.

Clint glanced over. They sat side-by-side on the bed. “Cognitive recalibration. Apparently if you hit
someone really hard on the head, you knock a couple things loose. Like creepy mind control.”

“Good job,” Natasha said.

“Thanks.”

“We’ve got to stop him,” she muttered.

Clint laughed hollowly. “Who’s we?”

“Whoever’s left.”

“So not Banner.”

Natasha shook her head.

“I’m going to fight an alien god with a bow and arrow,” Clint muttered.

“You sound like you again,” Natasha said.

Clint looked at her. “Huh?”

“Since you got Maria back. You were a little… off.”

“You don’t sound like you, though.”

Natasha gave him a questioning glance.

“We’re not soldiers, we’re spies,” Clint elaborated. “You especially. Now you want to wade into what’s probably going to be one hell of a war. Tasha, you’re a black ops agent. If you go out there you’re violating every rule in your rulebook. What did Loki do to you?”

“I’m surprised you think I care about the rule book,” Natasha said.

Clint waited.

“Fine,” she said irritatedly. “He hurt you when he took Maria, and by extension me.”

“I didn’t know you cared,” he said.

Natasha sighed. “You’re in an exclusive club.”

“Card-carrying member of the Natasha Actually Likes Me club,” Clint said, suddenly laughing.

Natasha smirked. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

He swatted her on the shoulder.

Neither his smile nor hers lasted long, though. Natasha was torn between this fight and thoughts of her Soldier, trying not to think about what might’ve been done to her in the intervening years, or where he might be.

She registered that the shower had turned off sometime in their conversation. “Maria’ll be done soon.”

Clint sighed. “And then we go find whoever’s left.”
“Me and Stark.”

They looked up and saw Steve standing at the door.

“How many interruptions can a man get?” Clint complained.

Steve blinked. “I’m sorry, am I intruding?”

“No, come in,” Natasha said. “Banner?”

“No sign of him. Stark’s convinced Loki’s going to use the arc reactor at Stark Tower to power his device. We’re going to suit up and go check it out.”

“I thought the Iron Man suit was damaged,” Natasha said.

Steve shrugged. “I trust Stark to get it working.”

“When do we leave?” Clint asked.

“Now. Fury’s distracted and he’ll saddle us with minders who’ll only slow us down if he knows.”

Steve gave them a hard look.

Natasha kept her face unreadable. “You’re asking us to willingly and consciously go behind our superior’s back.”

“Yes.”

Clint snorted. “I’ll admit this is not what I expected of you, Cap.”

“Don’t call me that,” Steve said. “Captain America... he died in the ice. He gave everything he had and then some for this country. I’m still figuring out exactly who I am in this new century, but it’s not that noble Captain who always followed his orders to the letter. I’ve got my own right and wrong.” He stopped. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to start speechifying.”

“Touching,” Maria said, hauling open the bathroom door.

Natasha and Clint both tensed. Natasha’s hands strayed to the shockstick at her belt. Maria had always been a stickler for the rules. If she tried to shut this down or go running to Fury...

Maria squinted at Steve.

“Bravo,” drawled a fifth voice, and Tony Stark stepped around the corner of the doorway, clapping sardonically and kicking it shut behind himself. “I think I like this version of Stephen Rogers a hell of a lot better than the one in dear old Dad’s bedtime stories. So.” He swept his eyes over Natasha, Clint, and Maria. “Is anyone gonna be a tattletale today?”

“I agree with Steve,” Natasha said, standing. “Playing by Fury’s rules hasn’t worked out so great this far.”

Clint shrugged, eyes on Maria.

Fury’s left-hand woman - well, right hand now that Coulson was gone - blew out a sigh. “I suppose you have a point. And you really should have someone responsible along for the ride.”

Clint smiled instantly. “Kay, that’s everyone, let’s go. How’re we getting there? Jet? Submarine? Do we all get Iron Man suits? Or is Thor gonna carry us in a monkey chain?”
Maria snorted. Clint shot her a gratified look.

“Jet,” Steve said, then froze, staring at Stark. “Stark, are there cameras in here?”

“Probably. Nick Fury is like Exhibit A of People Who Rely On Paranoia. But no worries, I always carry a jammer on me and it’s been going since I showed up to eavesdrop on your speech. Excellent performance, by the way; you should sell tickets. Speak freely, old man.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “All right. We’re taking a jet, Stark his suit. We’ll meet at the Tower unless we get there after the fight starts - we’re kind of dead in the water here.”

“Radio updates?” Maria asked.

Stark shook his head. “I had JARVIS get me a report from the bridge on my way here. Loki’s virus—Maria winced—seems to have turned our own jamming fields back on us. No comms, no radio, nothing for eight miles out. We’ve gotta get out of that range and hopefully recall Jane’s jet. Right now… Nothing.”

“Then let’s go,” Clint said.

“Hold on.” They all looked at Maria. She spoke slowly, as if weighing each word before it left her mouth. “Fury, Coulson, and I instituted a fail-safe in the hangar. No jets can launch unless there’s express permission from the bridge. The doors won’t open.”

“Stark, can you get around it?” Steve asked.

“JARVIS?”

Stark’s AI spoke from his master’s StarkPhone. “I believe I can modify the code used on the Pentagon and imitate a bridge release for the Hangar Three bay doors within one hour. Will that suffice?”

“Should be fine,” Stark said.

“Suit up, then. Meet at Hangar 3 in an hour. Get there without being seen on camera if possible, although in this chaos I doubt anyone will notice.” Steve looked around at this group of people that had somehow, some way, become something resembling a team. Natasha looked at Clint and Maria; all three of them stood to lose or endanger their positions at SHIELD over this, but not a hint of hesitation showed on anyone’s face.

“Looks like we’re all sick of following the rules,” Stark said snidely, reaching for the door. His comment appeared mostly aimed at Steve. “Welcome to the dark side.”

Natasha caught Clint’s eye roll in her peripheral vision as she followed Stark out the door.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

“Sir, we have an unidentified launch from hangar bay 3.”
Fury whipped around and stared at the understandably nervous third-year agent. “What did you just say?”

“Th-there's been an unauthorized launch from Hangar 3,” the agent stammered.

“Get me eyes on that bird!” Fury snapped. Inside he was cheering.

The chaos around him intensified. Slightly. Seconds later, a video feed from one of the escorts popped up on Fury’s screen.

He would never get tired of being the one giving the orders.

“It appears… that Captain Rogers, Agent Black—” Fury smirked a bit at Romanoff’s code name—“and Agents Barton and Hill have hijacked a jet.”

“Hill?” He’d been expecting the rest of them to make a run for it, but—“What the motherfucking hell does she think she's doing?”

“I don't know, sir, but that's definitely her in the cockpit.”

Fury gritted his teeth. He had wanted to keep Agent Hill. She was a brilliant woman and they'd worked well together for years.

But any war has its casualties. And the rest of it was still going according to plan.

Fury set his jaw and ordered the escorts to stand down, let the jet leave. Lang questioned him. “That's the Avengers,” Fury snapped. “Focus on the important things, like maybe getting our engines back online!”

“Yes, sir!”

He watched Lang jog away. Hill was an idiot, and she'd made her choice. Odds were she would die in the firefight to come. And if she didn’t?

Depending on what she saw, if she survived, Fury might have to eliminate her himself.

Chapter End Notes

I have another request for feedback on this update, and an update on my last request.

1. I have decided what to do with Jane. I'm not going to say yet ;) but I really appreciate all the feedback; you guys helped a lot and I got a lot of good input! (If anyone wants to leave more ideas for Jane pairings or lack thereof, go ahead and give it!
New York, United States
April, 2011

Tony skimmed one building after another, his suit almost scraping on the glass of some corporate high-rise, and aimed for Stark Tower. Inside the suit, his eyes were narrowed and his jaw clenched. That Loki had taken his tower, his masterpiece and hard work, and turned it to this purpose - it was galling.

Sure enough, when the top of the building came into view, there was Selvig, working around a complicated device with the Tesseract at its heart. As Tony noted the separate components of the device but even with the aid of JARVIS he couldn’t quite determine how it all worked, which was unfortunate, because he was deathly curious.

A beam of blue energy shot from the top of the device into the sky.

Too late.

“Selvig!” he shouted. “Shut it down!”

“It’s too late to stop it,” Selvig said, smiling manically up at Tony. “He wants to show us something! Something beautiful! A new universe!”

“Ohhh-kay, you sound like a cultie.” Tony raised his hands and blasted the device.

He was hurled backwards, ears ringing, fighting to stabilize the suit.

“Owww,” Tony complained.

“Sir, the shield is composed of pure energy. It’s unbreakable.”

“Yeah, noticed,” Tony growled, brushing sparks off his arm. Selvig had been tossed aside by the blast and wasn’t moving, but the Tesseract and the device sat unharmed. “Plan B.”

He glared at his battered suit and dropped thruster output, falling to the landing pad.

“The Mark 7 is not ready for deployment-”

“Then skip the spinning rims, we’re on the clock,” Tony snapped.

As he landed, the pad splintered beneath his feet and began to remove his suit piece by piece. Tony stepped through the gauntlet but paid little attention. He’d done this dozens of times, and his focus was taken up by the smirking idiot with a god complex down below on Tony’s balcony, strutting like he owned the damn tower.

Tony resisted the urge to clench his fists. He might be just a human in his thirties, but he was far from normal, and it was time to teach Loki that he might’ve forcefully taken over this tower but it would never be his.

And Tony also had to find Pepper.
“JARVIS, get me a lock on Pepper,” he murmured.

JARVIS spoke to Tony’s earpiece. “Ms. Potts was last recorded on the corporate level, half an hour ago.”

“Lewis and Foster?” They hadn’t been able to raise the Quinjet on the radio, and the younger women’s last known destination had been Stark Tower.

“Hangar logs on the roof show they landed two hours ago. They appear on the camera feeds en route to their rooms.”

“Get messages to their rooms,” Tony said softly, and stepped into the building.

He descended the stairs to the bar and the homing bracelets behind it. Loki paced slowly into the lower level, eyes fixed on Tony.

“Please tell me you’re going to appeal to my humanity,” Loki said with a smirk.

“Uh, actually, I was planning to threaten you.” Tony grabbed a bottle of Scotch and poured himself two ounces.

“You should have left your armor on for that.”

Tony shrugged and took a drink. “Yeah, it’s seen a bit of mileage. Drink?”

“Stalling me won’t change anything,” Loki said, still with that haughty smirk. Tony supposed it wasn’t too different from his own self-satisfied default expression, but then again he wasn’t genocidal. Jury was still out on the “crazy” front.

“No, no, no, threatening!” Tony said, and poured himself another ounce. “No drink? You sure?”

“The Chitauri are coming,” Loki said. “Nothing you can do will change that. What have I to fear?”

“The Avengers,” Tony said, swirling his glass.

Loki looked puzzled.

He shrugged again. “That’s what we call ourselves. Kinda like a team.”

“Yes,” Loki said. “I’ve met them.”

*Self-assured little bastard.* “Yeah, well takes us a while to get any traction…” Tony held Loki’s eyes and slipped the bracelets on behind the top of the bar. “But let’s do a head count here. Your brother, the demigod—” Loki made a face—“a supersoldier, a man with *breathtaking* anger management issues, a couple of master assassins - and you, genius, you’ve pissed off *every* one of them.”

Satisfaction crossed Loki’s face. “That was the plan.”

“Shitty plan.”

Was that a subtle nod? Tony narrowed his eyes and started down to the lower level. There was some sort of conversational subtext here that he was missing.

“I have an army.”

“We have a Hulk.”
Loki arched a brow. “I thought the beast had wandered off.”

Tony briefly, briefly allowed himself to wonder where Banner was and if he’d show. “You’re missing the point.” Tony snapped. “There’s no throne here. There’s no version of this where you come out on top. Maybe your army comes and maybe it’s too much for us, but guess who’s going to take the blame?” He fixed Loki with a glare. “We might not be able to defend the Earth, but you can be damn well sure we’ll avenge it.”

“How will your friends have time for me,” Loki said, stepping closer, “when they’re too busy fighting you?”

Tony felt his eyes widen and tried to step back, but he was too slow. The scepter pressed into his shirt.

And stopped against the arc reactor with a clink.

They both watched the power fade.

Loki did it again, harder, pinning Tony in place with a viselike grip on his bicep. Same result.

“This usually works,” Loki said.

Tony made a face. “Well, you know, performance issues - not *uncommon* -”

Loki’s face went from calm to wrathful so fast Tony blinked. Right before the Asgardian grabbed Tony around the throat and threw him across the room. “You will all fall before me,” Loki snarled.

Tony choked out, “JARVIS, any time now!”

Loki stormed over and seized Tony again just as he was getting back to his feet.

“Deploy,” Tony said, and then Loki threw him out the window.

Tony thanked his stars for the martial arts training he’d been doing for years. It was the only thing that kept him functioning through the adrenaline and fear: he curled into a ball and took the brunt of the impact with a blow that left bruises all down his left side but hopefully no broken bones, and then spread out into a skydiver’s fall.

Wind howled across his face. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t see; tears streamed from his eyes and he squinted them almost all the way shut. There was no sound but the wind but a glance aside caught a flicker of red light near his bracelet.

Half a second later, cool metal wrapped around his wrists.

Tony fell, and fell, and the suit folded itself around him, and with each shifting scale of iron and gold alloys, Tony’s heart settled a bit more.

Here, at least, he was in control.

The ground filled his field of vision when the faceplate locked into place. Tony instantly whipped himself around and gave full power to thrusters, stopping his descent feet above the pavement and shooting upwards with a roar.

The Mark VII was even better than he’d anticipated.

Loki was just picking himself up off the floor when Tony drew level with the busted window. *One*
Loki looked at Tony, scepter in hand and perfectly still. Tony had to admit he cut a majestic figure standing there with that terrifying helmet and the scepter and all the armor.

“There’s one more person you pissed off,” Tony snarled, and raised a hand. “His name was Phil.”

He blasted Loki in the chest.

The Asgardian flew backwards and slammed into the bar.

Poetic justice, bitch, Tony thought.

That was when the sky tore open.

Tony immediately shot backwards through the air, away from the tower, to get a better view. The beam of blue Tesseract energy was rippling and rumbling and slowly expanding into a disk that shredded apart across the middle, revealing a stunning view of stars and nebulae that was unfortunately ruined by the alien craft that came through it by the dozen, shooting at the city below.

“Right,” Tony said, slightly dazed. “Army.”

But he couldn’t meet it. Not quite yet.

Tony dropped along the outside of the tower, following JARVIS’ directions. Pepper’s rooms were… were…

“Stark!” Rogers’ voice crackled through the comms link in his helmet. “What’s the situation?”

“What, did you stop for drive through?” Tony snapped. “Where are you?”

“Ten minutes out.”

“I’m looking for Pepper. There’s an army pouring out of the sky. Hurry.”

“Leave off the search,” Steve snapped.

Tony kept looking. JARVIS reported no signs of Pepper, or of Foster and Lewis. “Rogers - Steve -”

“Look, I know you want to find Pepper,” Romanoff broke in. “But you need to go deal with the army first. Stark Tower is probably the safest place in the city right now. Loki will be focused on us, and the Chitauri won’t bust it down, not with the Tesseract on top.”

“Fine,” Tony breathed. He couldn’t tear through the whole tower anyway; there was no time. “Fine. Copy. I’ll go blow something up; I’ve heard it’s therapeutic.”

He muted their line and ordered Jarvis to keep a running scan through the tower for Pepper, Foster, or Lewis. Tony had a soft spot for the astrophysicist and her sarcastic friend, and Pepper - he didn’t know what he’d do if he lost her.

JARVIS put the blinking light indicating the ongoing scan in the bottom left of Tony’s HUD, and Tony fired his thrusters to the max, shooting skyward to meet the coming army.
New York, United States

April 2011

Thor almost fell out of the sky when he saw the destruction raining down on the Midgardian city.

He was no stranger to battlefields, but this was something beyond almost all the wars in which he’d ever fought. The enemy showed no restraint, no strategy; they fired at citizens and fighters alike and toppled buildings with their strange craft. Thor tore apart one such craft with a lightning bolt and smashed several others as he flew, but it was useless: there were too many.

Loki. Loki was doing this. Loki had brought this to the peaceful realm Thor so loved.

He’d managed to find his way back to the SHIELD airship, where the one-eyed Fury had informed him that a city known as New York was under attack, although the airship itself had no ability to move and so would not be there until after the battle. Thor had stopped long enough to orient himself and find sustenance - battles required significant energy expenditure - and as soon as he’d eaten his fill from the Midgardian ship’s “cafeteria,” he’d used Mjolnir to launch himself into the sky. Thor navigated by the sun as Fury had instructed, keeping it roughly to his left and flying in the direction known as “south,” following the coastline.

It hadn’t been long before he felt the energy pulse as the portal opened, and he pushed himself even faster.

And there on the horizon was Stark Tower, with the blue Tesseract bolt shooting up into the sky, Chitauri pouring from it like flies descending on a carcass.

Thor aimed for the Tower now, knowing that’s where Loki would be with his penchant for grandstanding and his desire to see the battle unfold.

Sure enough, there was the silhouette of the man who’d once been his brother, lean and dangerous against the skyline.

“Loki!” Thor bellowed, landing hard. “Shut down the Tesseract!”

“There’s no stopping it,” Loki snarled back. Alarm rang in Thor’s head. Loki looked deranged. “There is only the war!”

“So be it,” Thor growled, and raised Mjolnir.

Loki attacked with a simple overhead blow. Thor blocked and returned with a heavy strike, but Loki moved with that strange whirling fighting style that Thor had never fully understood, and he was not where Thor expected.

A blow to Thor’s knee almost sent him to the ground. He twisted, rolled, snapped to his feet. Loki was already swinging the strange scepter. Thor blocked, sidestepped, struck again: every move was thwarted by Loki.

He realized that he was actually trying.

Since when was Loki so skilled?

A Quinjet spun into place beside the tower, engines roaring. Thor reached for Mjolnir while Loki turned and fired once from his scepter, tearing a hole in the wing of the jet; it spiraled toward the ground.
“Enough!” Thor shouted.

Loki swept the scepter at him viciously. Thor ducked inside its reach and grappled Loki into submission with his greater strength, staring into those bright blue eyes.

“Look around you!” Thor shouted over the explosions. “Look! You think this madness will end with your rule?”

“It’s too late,” Loki said desperately, staring intently at Thor. Almost as if he were willing Thor to do something. “You can’t stop it.”

“No,” Thor said. “We can. Together.”

He’d do anything to fix this. And when it was done, then he would snap that wretched scepter and throw Loki in a hole.

Loki looked back at him, and his face softened a fraction, vulnerability and desperation bleeding through the mask.

His eyes flared with that manic energy that had driven him in the bowels of the airship, and he stabbed Thor in the side.

“Sentiment,” Thor heard him hiss.

He crumpled to the balcony.

Loki stepped back.

Thor sprang upright, seized Loki, and slammed him to the balcony hard enough to make it shake. The scepter skittered across the balcony and Loki collapsed, bleeding from the face, near the edge and the shattered glass railing.

“Loki-”

Loki rolled over and off the edge.

Thor ran forward and saw Loki on a Chitauri craft, soaring away at the head of a squadron. He gritted his teeth.

Fine. If Loki wanted war, then a war it would be, and Thor knew who would win.

He readied himself to fight.

New York, United States

April 2011

Steve crawled out of the wreckage of the Quinjet with Barton, Natasha, and Hill behind him.

They’d worked with Stark to take down one alien ship after another, Stark getting a tail of them like comet trails and Barton picking them off with his guns. They were ground-bound now. Time for a new strategy.

They were on an overpass. Chitauri soared their direction, energy blasts eating the pavement, but the
sky soldiers veered away to spare several dozen ground troops sprinting in their direction, still a block and a half away.

Barton swung an arrow into position. “Let’s have some fun.”

A fresh round of explosions split the air. Steve ducked, then looked to his right: below the overpass, on a ground-level street, a squadron of airborne Chitauri were rocketing along, shooting seemingly at random into the screaming crowds below.

“Those people need help,” Steve said.

“Go,” Natasha said, spinning her pistols into her hands. She gave him a savage smile. “We’ve got this.”

“You can hold them?” Steve asked.

“Cap- Rogers,” Barton said, “it would be my genuine pleasure.”

Steve nodded once, looked at Natasha and Hill ready with their guns, Barton with his bow, and prayed they’d be alive the next time he saw them. “Don’t die.”

“Likewise,” Hill said drily.

Steve dove off the side of the overpass.

He landed in a roll to absorb the shock and was up and running in the span of seconds, sprinting toward the trapped people.

New York, United States

April 2011

Clint fired arrow after arrow into the oncoming army before they were on top of him and the battle went hand-to-hand.

He preferred the cleanliness of a shot from afar, but he was an expert in close-quarters combat and he’d been trained in part by the Black Widow, so Clint waded in without fear.

One Chitauri after another fell to his fists and arrows and feet; he fired from bare feet away sometimes, or simply stabbed an arrow through a Chitauri eye socket. He moved in perfect sync with Natasha and Maria, their training taking over and turning them into a perfect unit.

He took advantage of a brief reprieve, jammed four arrows from nearby corpses back into his quiver, and ducked behind a parked car. Natasha did the same thirty feet to his left.

“Maria?”

“At your eight o’clock,” Maria said in the earpiece. “Covered.”

“Looks like there’s a new wave coming,” Natasha said.

Clint peeked through the car windows, then glanced at his friend.

They stood simultaneously, firing one after another. Clint took the baddies on his side and Natasha
the pack on hers, as they always did, ducking behind the cars’ thick engines for cover when they had to. Clint’s bowstring warmed and sang in his hands and Natasha’s twin Mausers barked in her hands one after another.

“It’s just like that time in Budapest all over again!” she said with a smirk.

“You and I remember Budapest very differently,” Clint said.

An explosion and then screaming erupted behind them.

A bus had been thrown by a Chitauri blast and tipped against a wall, the people trapped inside its busted exoskeleton.

“I got it!” Clint sprinted away, past Maria, who slid forward one car to another to take his place guarding Tasha’s flank. He compartmentalized his worry and kept running.

There was a little boy crying and clinging to one window while his father tried to push the child out.

“Here!” Clint shouted, swinging his bow across his back, all his senses tingling and alert for an attack from behind. He’d know if someone came near.

The kid stared at him, tears and dust streaking his face.

“It’s okay, kid. Here, I got you. Ready?” Clint said, forcing his face into a soft smile. His expression wanted to be manic, but that would probably just frighten the kid.

The boy sniffed and nodded.

“On three, okay? One… two… three !”

The little boy let go of the window and dropped into Clint’s waiting arms.

He parked the eight-ish-year-old against the bus and reached up again to help the little boy’s father down. “Get off the streets,” he told them. “Stay together, find basements, subway tunnels, anything like that. Don’t go up the buildings; stay out of the middle of the streets.”

The father nodded once, picked up his boy, and took off.

Clint helped down one person after another, shouting at them to move quickly and repeating his instructions to the father and son. When hands stopped coming out of the windows, he smashed the door with an arrow and hauled open the frame, letting more people flood out.

They vanished down the street away from downtown New York.

Clint took a deep breath, stretched his right bicep, and went back for Tasha and Maria.
Chapter 29

New York, United States
April 2011

Steve landed on the patrol car’s hood with a slam. The two arguing cops stared up at him in shock.

“I need men in these buildings,” he snapped, well aware that he was a formidable figure in his battle-scarred armor and helmet. “There are people inside who could run into the line of fire. You take ‘em through the basement or the subway; keep them off the streets.” Clint’s advice had come through the comms, and Steve seconded it. “I need a perimeter as far back as 39th; turn back anything that gets that far. This has to stay contained.”

“Why the hell should I listen to you?” the fat older cop demanded.

Steve barely had time to register his indignation before three Chitauri soldiers dropped off a ship above and charged at him, hissing.

He hooked one’s weapon with his shield and spun the thing into the one in the middle, deflecting an energy blast from the third with his shield in the same movement, and slammed a booted foot into the first one’s chest. It caved in like a pinata. Steve nailed an uppercut in the jaw of the third, exchanged a flurry of blows with the remaining Chitauri, and snapped the thing’s neck.

The two cops stared at him.

Steve glared back.

The older cop marched away, shouting Steve’s orders at his squad.

Steve smirked and took off running.

New York, United States
April 2011

Tony screamed around the city, moving faster than he ever had for this long. The suit was performing beautifully; it had taken several scrapes along walls and pavement that had done little more than scratch the paint. Tony knew the red and gold was mostly vanity, but he didn’t care. If he was going to be helping people, they didn’t get to criticize how he looked while doing it.

“Sir, there are fourteen Chitauri on your tail.”

“Good, that’ll keep ‘em off the streets. Rogers?”

“Kinda busy, ” Rogers panted over the comms.

Tony whipped his hands out and made a ninety degree direction change. Two Chitauri ships slammed into a building and exploded. He prayed no one was in there.

“Where are you?”
“Uh-”

“Captain Rogers is here, sir,” JARVIS chimed in, and a location appeared on Tony’s HUD.

“Perfect.” He whipped around, blasted two Chitauri ships - one went down with a dead driver, the other swerved into a third and took them both out - absorbed three shots to his armor, and took off in Rogers’ direction.

“Sir-”

Tony looked up.

“What the everloving shit is that!” he yelled.

The leviathan was enormous, the length of several city blocks at the very least, looking like a flying mutated sky whale the size of a shopping mall in heavy armor. Tony soared up next to its side.

“JARVIS, find me a soft spot.”

“The armor is impenetrable. I see no visible weaknesses in its carapace.”

“Lovely,” Tony muttered. He didn’t see any either.

The leviathan flew (swam?) through a building, leaving thousands of tons of steel and concrete rubble in its wake. Tony aimed downward, scanning for biosigns: there, there -

He fired his thrusters and flew into the dust cloud, hauling rebar and blocks aside until he could pull three women and two men out of the remains of an elevator shaft. Tony passed on the orders he’d heard Barton and Steve giving and sent them on there way.

With no other biosigns close enough for him to save easily, Tony forced himself to take off again and head for the leviathan. He had to leave them behind. The sooner they ended this battle, the sooner the rescue workers could get in here, and that wouldn’t happen with that leviathan in the air.

Tony careened around a building and came face-to-face with the thing.

“God, it’s ugly,” he said. “Let’s make it uglier.” He fired a swarm of rockets.

The tiny guided missiles screamed through the air at the target highlighted on Tony’s HUD. They slammed in quick succession into a patch of less-armored flesh (or whatever) on the thing’s cheek. The leviathan let out an air-shaking roar and turned toward Tony.

“Well, that got its attention,” he said. “What the hell was step 2?”

“I recommend you lead it up higher, away from the buildings, and keep it focused on you,” JARVIS said.

“Yes, that’s very helpful,” Tony said, and took off into an ascent. The leviathan roared again and followed.

New York, United States

April 2011

Natasha leaped off a car and landed hard on a Chitauri’s shoulders, clinging with her legs while it
spun and flailed at her with that damn energy spear. She seized the weapon, yanked it out of the thing’s hand, and stabbed a knife through the weak point she’d discovered on the tops of their helmets. The Chitauri collapsed and she rode it to the ground, exchanging the knife for a pistol and taking down three more before she hit the pavement and rolled. The empty pistol went back in her boot until she could reload. She uncoiled to her feet, bent backwards away from an energy beam, and slashed a Chitauri with the spear in her hands. The fight lasted seconds before she cut its throat and dodged behind a car, breathing hard and waiting for the next one.

Nothing came.

Cautiously, she poked her head up and over the hood of the vehicle. No Chitauri in sight, at least not alive.

Clint ducked out from a shattered storefront. “Where’d they go?”

“I think we killed them all,” Maria said, yanking a throwing knife out of a Chitauri’s chest. Natasha approved. “You two are amazingly efficient.”

“That’s what happens when you work together as long as we have,” Clint said, grinning.

Natasha winced. Maria looked annoyed for a fraction of a second before she tucked it away, but Natasha saw it, and made a note to talk to Clint later. He and Maria would have enough problems halting their passionate debates long enough to get together without Maria thinking Clint was into Natasha, too.

“There’re still soldiers around,” Steve said on the comms. “I’m two blocks south. Meet in the middle?”

“Can you get here? I’m salvaging arrows,” Clint said.

Natasha shot him a look and started to reload her guns. She’d gone through half the ammo she had on her.

He raised his hands, one of them full of arrows dripping Chitauri gore. It ran over Clint’s fingers and down his forearm. He didn’t seem to notice. “What? I have limited resources. And don’t give me that look. They’re more reusable than bullets.”

Maria laughed.

“En route,” Steve said.

Natasha spotted him seconds later, jogging their direction. Aside from his footsteps, the city was eerily silent as he came to a stop next to them.

Clint wiped arrows one by one on the seat of a shattered nearby car and stuck them back in his quiver, which whirred and spun to accommodate the new additions.

“We need to—”

With a boom, Thor landed next to the group.

There was a subtle but instant shift, as Natasha, Maria, Clint, and Steve all turned and squared up against Thor. Their last encounter with him hadn’t ended well.

Steve was clearly simmering with tension. “What’s the story upstairs?”
“The energy field around the Tesseract is unbreakable,” Thor said in his deep voice.

“Thor is right,” Stark chimed in over the comms. “We gotta deal with these guys.”

Natasha decided it was time to move them along. “How do we do this?”

“As a team,” Steve said simply.

“I have unfinished business with Loki,” Thor said angrily.

Maria raised an eyebrow at him. “I suggest you get in line.”

Clint snorted.

Thor glared at them both.

The put-put of an engine sliced through the rising tension. All five of them spun to analyze the newcomer.

Banner.

He pulled up on an ancient motorcycle wearing clothes that clearly did not fit, hair disheveled. “So, this all seems… horrible,” he said, clearly uncomfortable.

Next to Natasha, Steve softened.

“I’ve seen worse,” she said pointedly.

He winced. “Sorry.”

“No. We could… use a little worse.”

“Is that Banner’s dulcet tones I hear?” Stark asked.

Clint laughed.

“Yes,” said Steve.

“Good. I’m bringing the party to you.”

A rumble shook the ground beneath them, and the team turned to stare as Tony swung around a corner and headed straight toward them at top speed. There was a leviathan on his tail.

“I don’t see how that’s a party,” Natasha said as calmly as she could.

Banner glanced at the rest of them, then began to walk forward.

Tony dove low, shooting toward them. The leviathan followed suit, barrelling along close to the ground.

“Dr. Banner,” Steve said. “Now might be a really good time to get angry.”

“That’s my secret, Cap,” Banner said, and the smile he shot them over his shoulder was a strange combination of bitter and relieved, frightened and content. “I’m always angry.”

He turned away.
The movement became transformation. Skin faded from pale to green; his muscles twisted and grew; Banner’s skeleton expanded upward. It was altogether smoother and faster than the one Natasha had seen.

The Hulk roared a challenge back at the leviathan and charged straight for it.

The rest of the team flinched back when the impact rolled through the pavement. The Hulk drove his fists into the leviathan’s jaw, feet digging huge scars in the street as he roared with the strain. Force echoed up the leviathan’s long body as the scales slammed into one another - and came loose.

Alien metal thundere to the ground around the Hulk and the leviathan as the Chitauri beast shuddered and died, collapsing along the length of the street.

In the silence that followed, furious Chitauri screams rose from the surrounding streets.

The Hulk appeared, leaping over the thing’s corpse and slamming into the street next to the rest of them. Natasha tensed, remembering the last time she’d been this close to the Hulk, but he just snarled and joined their circle as everyone braced themselves for the Chitauri who came swarming over the buildings toward them.

There was a pause.

The portal pulsed and flared wider. Hundreds more Chitauri ships, four more leviathans…

Natasha’s breath caught. This was a nightmare.

She fingered her guns. Good thing she was a nightmare, too.

“Guys,” Maria said, shifting backward.

“Call it, Steve,” Stark said.

Natasha couldn’t help glancing at him and noticed Clint and Maria’s surprise as well. Stark was… asking someone else to give him orders?

He must’ve noted their expressions. “I can bend to someone who’s better at battle math than I am,” Stark said irritably.

“Until we can close that portal, we’re gonna use containment,” Steve said, ignoring them. “Barton, I want you up on that roof—” he pointed—“eyes on everything. Call out patterns and strays; take down anything that tries to get out. Stark, you’re border patrol. Anything gets farther than three blocks out, turn it back or turn it to ash.”

“Give me a lift?” Clint asked Stark.

“Right,” Stark said, stepping behind Clint and securing a grip on his tactical harness. “Better clench up, Legolas.”

With a roar of thrusters, they were gone.

“Thor, you bottleneck that portal,” Steve continued. “Use your lightning. Tear them apart.”

Thor nodded once, shot Steve one more glare, and took off, Mjolnir humming in his hand.

“The three of us are on the ground,” Steve said, gesturing at Maria, Natasha, and himself. “We protect the innocents of this city, keep Loki focused on us, or these guys’ll go wild. And, Hulk?”
The beast snapped his head to Steve in a vicious movement.

“Smash,” Steve said.

A cruel smile crossed the Hulk’s face, and he launched. Natasha watched as he leaped from building to building, using Chitauri soldiers as ragdolls and weapons, impervious to their energy blasts.

Natasha pulled her focus back to the street as Steve and Maria shifted and prepared for the next wave. She fell in on Steve’s right flank while Maria took his left.

“Ready?”

Natasha and Maria shared a glance. It was all they needed. “Yes,” Natasha said.

Steve took a breath and ran forward.
Chapter 30

New York, United States

April 2011

Thor aimed for the tallest building he could see near the portal. There was a ledge near the top, and he planted his feet there, leaned back against the roof, and raised Mjolnir.

Thunder cracked and rumbled.

Teeth gritted, Thor summoned as much storm energy as he could without setting off a chain reaction that would destroy the Midgardian city. Clouds swirled above his head; lightning flashed between them.

He felt the bolt coming. The hair on his arms stood up. Energy made the air tremble in readiness.

The lightning slammed into Mjolnir.

The bolt was a single glowing connection between Thor and the heavens, and he rejoiced as he felt Mjolnir drink and drink and drink of the lightning’s power, sucking it into an almost bottomless pit. Only twice had Thor ever exhausted Mjolnir’s capability to contain this power before releasing it on an enemy. The first time he’d destroyed an army; the second, a large moon. Both incidents had left him violently in need of sustenance and incapacitated for days. He had no intention of drawing that much power now, but he would need a significant amount.

Wait… wait… now.

Thor roared a challenge as he thrust Mjolnir at the portal.

Lightning lanced from its end, finding target after target. Bolts played between Chitauri ships, lashing out at new targets once one was destroyed; Thor felt one massive drain and then another and then a third as the leviathans shuddered and died beneath his onslaught. And still, they came.

Thor clung to the building and grimly poured his strength and Mjolnir’s into the battle. He was a warrior by blood and birth and training; he knew how to conserve his strength. He also knew this was a losing battle. If they could not discover how to shut down the portal, they would not win.

New York, United States

April 2011

Tony found himself facing one of the leviathans. Again.

Hulk had taken down a second four blocks away, but the beast was somewhere near the tower and Tony couldn’t summon him or Thor. They both had their own fights.

He raised a hand and aimed his laser cutter at the thing’s shell.

“Sir, we will lose power before we penetrate that shell.”
Tony shut the laser off and gunned it, catching up with the leviathan’s head. It was aiming right for an apartment complex that glowed like a Christmas tree with biosigns. The people were frantic, screaming and scrambling, but they’d never get out in time.

“JARVIS, you ever hear the story of Jonah?” Tony asked.

JARVIS hesitated. “I wouldn’t consider him a role model.”

Too bad. Tony screamed like a banshee and shot a rocket at the leviathan’s face. It roared its anger, and there was his opportunity. Tony flew straight down the thing’s throat.

He had a feeling that it would smell nasty as hell in here if the suit weren’t filtering it out. The leviathan’s gullet was dark, wet, slimy, and revolting.

Tony deployed almost all his remaining explosives and flew as far down the leviathan’s throat as he could.

The fireballs bloomed around him. The temp controls on the suit went into overdrive, frantically trying to keep Tony from cooking alive inside his armor. The leviathan shuddered and its roar seemed to fill its belly and the Iron Man suit.

Tony was flung away from its carcass and hit the pavement in a rain of scorched flesh, suit smoking and defenses low.

“Well, that sucked,” he muttered.

A furious squad of Chitauri descended on him, chittering and screaming.

Tony groaned and readied himself for another flight.

New York, United States

April 2011

“Steve, these guys aren’t going to stop coming!” Maria shouted.

Steve bashed a Chitauri away from him and deflected a shot with his shield back into the squad that had fired it, tearing them to pieces and earning the trio a brief reprieve. “Not much we can do,” he snapped.

Natasha finished off an alien, used its energy spear to shoot down several crawling over the walls of the surrounding block, and rejoined her team. “I need to get up there and shut it down.”

“Our flyers are occupied,” Steve said.

Natasha backed up toward the edge of the overpass they were fighting on, glancing up at the Chitauri ships screaming by overhead. “I got a ride. Could use a boost, though.”

Maria looked at her and nodded once. Natasha appreciated the other woman for simply accepting her capabilities. “Maria,” she said quickly. “In case I die? There’s nothing romantic between me and Clint. Never has been, never will be. He knows that. I thought you should know too.”

Maria was silent.
“You sure?” Steve asked.

“Yeah,” Natasha said, thinking about what would come: testing herself against these things, killing creatures that no one would care were dead. “It’ll be fun.”

Steve backed up, knelt, and raised his shield.

Natasha saw a ship coming toward them and picked her moment, sprinting forward and jumping onto the shield. Steve hurled her upward and she jumped in the same movement, shooting upward and catching the bottom of a Chitauri craft with both hands.

It was worse than the exercises of her youth, which had involved jumping onto moving trains. This thing was going faster, was less stable, and she didn’t have nearly as good a grip.

Teeth bared with effort, Natasha hauled herself up onto the back of the vehicle.

There were two Chitauri soldiers with ranged weapons of some kind in the back and one up front, flying. The two in the back were chained to the deck to keep them aboard. Natasha slashed both sets of chains, shoved one of them off the craft, and exchanged a flurry of blows with the second before it, too, lost its balance and she snapped its neck. The corpse tumbled for the street.

“Okay,” she said, drew two knives, and climbed up the back of the one in front.

It chittered and thrashed, but she nailed both sides of the thing’s neck with little brutal blades concealed near her wrists.

The Chitauri screamed, and Natasha knelt on top of it with teeth bared, swinging and leaning to direct it. They were clumsy and slow, but progress was being made.

A shot clipped the tail of the craft.

They spun almost three hundred and sixty degrees and slammed into a wall. Natasha killed the Chitauri pilot, shoved it out of the way, and took the controls herself. They were complicated and organic and unlike anything she’d ever seen, but she had seen the pilot use them enough to figure out acceleration, deceleration, and turning, and that was really all she needed.

Natasha gunned the craft and it leaped forward.

More blue shots flashed past, shattering buildings as she dodged. A quick glance over her shoulder revealed that it was Loki at the vanguard of the pack on her tail.

Her earpiece crackled. “Tasha, what are you doing?”

Natasha glanced at the rooftop where Clint was posted. “Uh… Little help?”

She saw him draw an arrow before she had to turn and face forward again, trying to stay in his range but not die.

“Got him,” Clint said.

Seconds later, an explosion shook the air.

Natasha glanced back once and saw bodies flying from Loki’s craft and those around it, hurled by the force of Clint’s explosive arrow. Loki landed on the balcony outside Stark’s penthouse suite, but Natasha didn’t have time to worry: the Hulk smashed his way into the penthouse seconds later and Nat clearly saw him batter Loki about until the Asgardian was unconscious on the floor.
More explosions came from behind. Natasha glanced behind: there were no more Chitauri aerial units on her tail.

Time to make her move.

She aimed her craft upward, looping around the energy beam on top of Stark Tower and beneath the portal. Thor’s lightning still flickered around it, weaker now but frying a third of the soldiers who came through.

She had to close the portal before Thor’s lightning was gone completely.

Rather than try and figure out how to land the craft, Natasha pointed it over the top of the tower, let go at the last second, and dropped off.

The craft kept going. She hit the gravel on the roof and rolled and rolled and slammed into a metal electricity access panel.

Shaking dust out of her hair, Natasha climbed to her feet.

There was Selvig, looking dusty and sweaty and dazed as he stared at the battle beneath them.

“Doctor,” she said cautiously.

As he turned toward her, she recognized the sign: she’d seen the footage of Hill and Selvig when they were taken. The bright blue eyes were the sign of the scepter’s influence. Selvig’s were back to his own watery gray-blue shade.

Where else had she seen eyes like that?

Natasha pushed that thought aside. She could consider the niggling sense of missing something later.

“The energy from the Tesseract,” he said, urgently. “It can’t… protect against itself. The scepter…”

“It’s okay,” she said, uncomfortable. Providing comfort was not part of her training. “You didn’t know what you were doing.”

“Someone did,” Selvig said. “There’s a failsafe built into the CMS machine.”

“Loki’s scepter,” Natasha said, realizing.

“It’s the only thing that can shut down the portal,” Selvig said, and turned to look back at the balcony below. “And I’m looking right at it.”

Natasha ran for the rooftop door.

[Classified Location], SHIELD Helicarrier

April 2011

Fury shut down the Council’s screens.

A nuclear strike. He hadn’t thought they’d have the balls for that kind of action, but he had to admit that the battle wasn’t going as well as he had expected either. It might be the only way to contain this.
He had to keep resisting the strike, though. He had to give the Avengers a chance to pull this off - for his plan to work.

“Sir, we have an unauthorized bird launch!” Balik shouted.

Fury swore and bolted from the bridge. They’d launched the nuke anyway with an override code. Fucking Council…

This was why he needed this plan to work.

Fury grabbed a shoulder-mounted missile launcher from a weapons locker on the way up. He dashed out on the deck just as a jet screamed by, aimed carefully…

The missile took out its left wing, and the jet spun into a stop on the deck.

Fury straightened.

Another roar made him spin. A second jet was taking off from the lower runway. And he had no more missiles.

Fury’s hand twitched toward his pistol, but it was no use.

The jet and its deadly payload were gone.

New York, United States

April 2011

The shots rang against Tony’s suit.

He blasted two Chitauri and simply kicked two more, caving in their chests, but the shots kept coming. He was exhausted, power low, arsenal depleted, but he wouldn’t give up.

“Stark! You hearing me? We have a missile heading straight for the city!”

Fury’s words filled Tony with dread. “Ow - shit - how long?”

“Three minutes tops. Stay low and wipe it out!”

“Got it,” Tony got out. “JARVIS, put everything we’ve got into the thrusters!”

“I just did,” JARVIS said, and the suit blasted away, a Chitauri soldier losing his grip on Tony’s ankle and falling to the ground. He left them behind. Bruised, aching, sweaty and bloody and tired.

He got a radar scan going. The missile popped up on top, out over the water by the bridge. Tony angled toward it, almost overshot, and came up beneath the innocent white casing from behind. With a grunt, he clamped his arms around it and transferred power to his chest thruster to balance his flight.

“I can close the portal!” Romanoff shouted into the comms. “I can shut it down! Does anybody copy?”

“Do it!” Steve said instantly.
“No, wait!” Tony shouted.

“Stark-”

“I’ve got a nuke coming in,” Tony said. “And I know just where to put it.”

“Sir, shall I put in a call to Ms. Potts?” JARVIS asked.

“Might as well,” Tony said.

The missile was stubborn, like leading a drunk cow with a heavy rope. It did not want to go off its programmed course. Tony ground his teeth and forced it up, up, up-

He skinned the face of his tower, caught a glimpse of his shattered, empty penthouse and then Romanoff and Selvig on the roof, and then he was in the open sky and the energy beam was crackling across his suit and the call to Pepper was still ringing, ringing-

And then he was in space.

It was beautiful and terrible.

Tony had seconds to thank himself for having taken the time to seal and pressurize the suit. He released the missile with a shove in the direction of a ship the size of the moon, drifting in the black. Leviathans and soldiers poured toward him, a never-ending stream.

They’d have lost.

Tony’s HUD flickered, and he fired his thrusters once with the last of his power for the portal. This was space; his inertia would keep him going until he could get back through and Earth’s gravity took hold of him again.

At least that way, they’d have a body to bury. He knew… this was it.

The call failed.

At least he was going out with a hell of a view. This was something no other human had ever seen.

He fixed his eyes on the distant stars and decided that was a fitting end for Tony Stark.
Chapter 31

New York, United States

April 2011

Steve stared at the portal, willing Tony to come back through.

Light bloomed through it: the explosion.

He waited as long as he dared, but - they really couldn’t handle any more of those things. They couldn’t handle the Tesseract collapsing and blowing up the city and they definitely couldn’t handle it if another nuke came in.

“Close it,” he said quietly.

It was the hardest order he’d ever had to give.

He heard Natasha huff with exertion. Seconds later, the blue beam flickered and died.

Steve slumped.

They watched the portal with bated breath, saw it flicker and writhe and begin to close.

It was nothing more than a swirl of rapidly shrinking black-and-blue in the sky above New York when the gleaming form of Iron Man tumbled through.

Cheers immediately burst from Steve’s exhausted team but died almost instantly as they realized that something was very, very wrong.

“He’s not stopping,” Thor said, and began to whirl Mjolnir, but even Steve could see that he’d never get there in time.

That was when the Hulk came flying out of nowhere and slammed into Tony’s falling body.

With Iron Man limp as a ragdoll in the Hulk’s left arm, the beast slammed into an old brick building, slid down four stories, and leaped off again. He landed on his back and skidded half a block with Tony clutched to his chest, coming to rest fifty feet from Steve, Maria, and Thor.

As they got there, Hulk shoved Tony off his body with a clang, and scrambled back to his feet with a snort.

The arc reactor was dark.

Steve reached down and wrenched Tony’s faceplate off, tossing it carelessly behind him. The man was nonresponsive.

“Come on, Stark,” Maria said quietly.

The Hulk roared suddenly and loudly right in Tony’s face. All of them flinched, and Tony came awake with a jolt, eyes wide and gasping. The reactor flickered back to life.

“What happened?” he said. Tony’s eyes were wide and frantic, jumping around between all of them one by one. “Please tell me nobody kissed me.”
Steve stared at Tony for a second, and then a surprised, exhausted laugh forced its way out of its throat.

“We won,” he said.

Tony slumped back down to the pavement. “Yay, go team. Uh - you know what we should do? Food. There’s this shwarma place? About two blocks from here. I don’t know what that is but I want to try it.”

“We’ve a lot left to do,” Steve reminded him. “You have to find Pepper, remember?”

Tony’s eyes closed. “She didn’t answer my call.”

“She was probably watching the news,” Steve said soothingly. “Or cell service is down. Stark Tower is fine. We need to head off, coordinate the National Guard and the army and the rescuers…”

“I need to get out of sight,” Natasha said tightly over the comms. “I’m a walking target for half the intelligence agencies on the planet.”

“Use the tower,” Tony said tiredly. “There’s a safe room halfway between the penthouse and the one below it. Press… left side of the fourth stair down and say “Tony sent me”. JARVIS’ll let you in. Lay low for a couple days, no one will find you.”

Natasha hesitated. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, no prob,” he said, tried to move, and winced. “Ahhh. Think I got a broken rib or three. JARVIS, get me out of this thing?”

“Hydraulic removal systems and translocation systems all offline,” JARVIS said.

“Then use the emergency auto release. I’ve got other models.”

With a hiss and a clank, the suit simply fell apart around Tony’s battered body. Steve and Maria helped him push the pieces aside and climb slowly to his feet.

A gasp and thump made them all spin around to see Hulk shrinking and turning a light skin color once again, until the naked form of Bruce Banner lay shivering in the fetal position on the pavement amid the ruins of his pants.

Tony’s eyes widened, and he took off for the sidewalk.

“Stark! Where are you going?” Maria shouted, but he didn’t reply, instead vanishing into a shattered storefront halfway down the block.

Steve decided to trust that Tony wasn’t just phobic about nude male bodies and knelt next to Banner. “Hey,” he said quietly. “Dr. Banner. Can you hear me?”

Bruce looked blearily up at him. “Steve.”

“Yep. We survived,” Steve said. “Thanks to you.”

Bruce closed his eyes, relief sweeping his face. “I… wasn’t sure. That it would work, I mean.”

“The Hulk saved all our lives,” Maria said firmly. She was always very closed-off; Steve was glad to see that her face softened when Bruce looked her way. “And hundreds, if not thousands, of others. We wouldn’t have survived long enough to close the portal.”
“Here,” Tony broke in. Steve looked up and saw that he was holding out a brand-new set of clothes: button-down, pair of boxers, jeans, and tennis shoes. “There’s a clothing store a block down. Don’t give me that look, Rogers, I keep spare cash in the soles of my suits and I left about four hundred dollars hidden behind the counter with a note. Put your righteous guns away.”

Steve snorted.

“And if not for you, Loki would still be running around out here,” Natasha said over comms. “You battered him up pretty good. I hate to say it, but he’s gone now. And, Stark, I’m at the entrance to your safe room, and I’ve found the unconscious bodies of Darcy Lewis and Jane Foster inside.”
Chapter 32

New York, United States

April 2011

When the team stepped out of the elevator in Stark Tower, Tony stared with wide eyes.

It had escaped the worst of the devastation, but there was still a lot of damage, including a body-shaped dent in the center of the penthouse.

Bruce squinted at it. “I think I made that.”

“Looks a little small for the other guy,” Tony said flippantly, hiding the worry twisting in his gut.

Bruce shot him a look. “With Loki.”

“Like an Asgardian rag doll! That must’ve been fun,” Tony said, thinking briefly of Coulson.

“Where’s the safe room?” Clint interrupted.

Tony rubbed his fingers over the arc reactor. “This way.”

He led Barton and Bruce across the penthouse to the back stairs. They led up to Tony’s private floor or down to the first of the R&D levels. JARVIS opened the doors for them, and they stepped into the stairwell.

Romanoff flipped upright when she saw them from a perch on the stairs.

“Sheathe your claws, it’s just us,” Tony said. “Are they inside?”

Romanoff nodded. She pressed down on the left side of the fourth stair down from the landing, and the staircase collapsed inward until a door just barely tall enough for her was visible.

Barton whistled.

Tony ducked into the safe room beyond.

It was small by Stark standards, with three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen, and an entertainment room that showed clearly the signs of both Tony and Pepper’s decorating hands. The furniture was sleek and modern, perfectly efficient, but one of the two desks was a disaster and the other was neat as a pin.

“Do you use this as an office?” Barton asked, poking through the papers on Tony’s desk.

“Not really,” he said absently, checking the first bedroom. It was the one with bunk beds, and it was empty. “Just… we like to keep backups of important things in here. You know. A failsafe.”

“Ever had to use this place?” Barton asked.

Tony shook his head.

He glanced in the second bedroom, the one with the king-sized bed that he and Pepper had chosen for themselves, and flinched when he saw the on and muted television screen. Somebody was talking
about him - about Tony - and the origin of Iron Man. He saw shaky video of the battle on the ship, when Pepper had Extremis, and -

gunfire and explosions rocked the air. Tony was desperate, searching, screaming, fighting. His muscles burned like the fire around him. He was a fighter but this was worse, this was Pepper, he could lose her lose her lose her-

He was hanging from the roof above the first arc reactor prototype, while Shane marched toward him in the massive, bloated, warped version of Tony’s elegant suit; he was screaming at Pepper to push the button; he knew he was about to die-

He was crawling across the floor of his lab, the old arc reactor mocking him from the place of honor Pepper had made for it, his salvation if only he could reach it; the pain in his chest was turning up like a dial every second and he was gasping, he knew cardiac arrest wasn’t far away, and the only reason there was a chance of survival was Pepper Pepper Pepper-

“Stark.”

Tony blinked and stared at Romanoff.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m… I’m fine,” he snapped. “Why’d you wait so long out there? You could’ve told me where they are.”

“Third bedroom,” she said, looking at him oddly. “And I’ve been in here for at least two minutes. You weren’t responding.”

Tony smirked at her, but it felt lackluster. “World doesn’t revolve around you, Romanoff.”

He stepped into the last bedroom.

Darcy Lewis and Jane Foster were sprawled on each of the double beds. They looked awkward, as if they hadn’t fallen asleep there - as if they’d fallen asleep somewhere else and someone had moved them.

Pepper. Only she and Tony and now Romanoff and Barton knew about this place. He realized that he was uncomfortable with all of them invading what had been designed as his and Pepper’s space, even though they had enough room for others - no one else had ever been in here. Tony had built it himself.

Romanoff strode past him with a glass of water.

“Wait!” Tony said. “Don’t get the mattress wet.”

Barton snorted.

Romanoff hauled Darcy into a sitting position and splashed water in her face.

She sputtered and blearily opened her eyes. “Whaaa… huh?”

“Darcy,” Tony said tightly.

“Who…”

“Sorry, you’re not that memorable,” Darcy said, shaking water out of her eyes. Tony reared back.

“It bites!” Inwardly, he was relieved. The return of the sass meant Darcy was back to herself.

Romanoff repeated the process twice with Jane, but the scientist didn’t wake up.

“Do you remember what happened?” Bruce asked Darcy gently.

She made a face and started trying to pat her hair down; it was kinked and awkward-looking in the back. “Mostly. It’s kinda fuzzy. I know we got off the Quinjet and Pepper met us; she was asking - if you were okay, Stark - and then she told us we could come up here until we had a communication from SHIELD. I wanted food and Jane came with me up to the penthouse. Then…” She hesitated. “Then we realized Loki was in the building somewhere.”

Barton sat up straight. “How could you tell?”

“Theyir eyes,” Darcy said. “They turn bright blue. I saw it on the footage when that hardass lady agent was taken.”

Barton snickered. Darcy glanced his way, and her eyebrows slowly crept up her forehead. Tony stifled a laugh.

“I get it,” Darcy said, looking smug. “Well. Anyway. There was this scientist dude who wandered up into the penthouse and Pepper told him off for coming up there - here - whatever, and he was acting all weird and poking around. That was when I noticed the eyes, and he left, and Pepper said she knew a safe room where we could wait and keep trying to contact you. She led Jane and me down here and we were sitting around the table watching the news… I don’t remember much after that.”

“Much?” Tony said, grasping onto that word.

“Tea,” Darcy said. “And something about mothers.”

“Mothers?” Barton asked, but Tony understood.

“Pepper’s mom lives about five blocks away,” he said numbly. “She drugged the tea so Foster and Lewis would stay here and went after Sara.”

“He’s met Pepper’s parents?” Barton whispered to Romanoff, but Tony wasn’t listening. Steve and Maria were out there, handling the cleanup and directing rescue efforts. He fumbled in his pocket for his phone with fingers that shook just the slightest bit.

It rang, and rang, and rang.

“Tony, he’s probably busy,” Darcy said. He could feel her eyes on him: sad, but not pitying.

“He’ll answer,” Tony said. Because I need him to.

Steve picked up the phone. “Tony, now is not the best-”

“Pepper’s gone,” Tony said brusquely, and gave Steve the address. “Has anyone looked in that area yet?”

There was a pause and muffled shouting in the background. Tony kept his face calm but his grip on his StarkPhone was white-knuckled.
“There are some National Guard patrols down that way, but none have gone up in the buildings yet, and that address is on the tenth floor. Tony-”

“Keep rescuing, Cap,” Tony said tersely, and hung up. He glanced at the rest of the team in the safe room. “Tower’s yours. Food, water, beds, condoms, whatever. I’m going after Pepper.”

He took two steps toward the exit to the safe room. A click sounded from behind, and Tony froze.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Romanoff said, voice like steel. “Judging by your movements, you’ve a broken rib that could puncture a lung unless you get immediate medical attention. I believe there is a medbay one floor down, I seem to remember that our friend Bruce here is a doctor.”

Tony turned around and stared at her. “Are you seriously holding me at gunpoint?”

“Can you do anything?” Romanoff asked Bruce.

The other scientist hesitated. “I… if it’s already punctured an organ, he’s going to need surgery, and that’s not something I can do. But I can do an X-ray and make sure it’s not immediately life-threatening.”

“Good,” Romanoff said. “Come on.”

“Hey! Hello! Uh, I don’t know if you’ve noticed me standing here, but I feel I should inform you that I don’t take orders well,” Tony snapped. “I am going after Pepper, and you should really get out of my way.”

“How will it help Pepper if you kill yourself searching for her?” Romanoff demanded.

Tony paused.

Romanoff glared.

“Fine,” Tony said, voice cracking. “But the second they declare me stable, I am gone, and I will fly through you if you get in my way.”

Romanoff didn’t bother to answer, just followed him intently out of the safe room and down to the medbay.

Tony was bare-chested on an exam table, poking disinterestedly at the tight wrapping Bruce had tied around his ribs. Bruce kept wrapping it and glanced at Tony. “You’re not to put on so much as a gauntlet for a month.”

“No,” Tony said instantly.

“Yes, or this won’t heal right and your recovery will be longer,” Bruce said, showing an uncharacteristic sternness. Or maybe it was characteristic. Tony hadn’t seen firsthand the man’s face before he Hulked out, but he’d heard from Steve that it was somewhat… unusual.

Tony quirked an eyebrow. “What if I don’t care?”

“You’ll care when you refracture your two ribs from lifting something heavy or taking the recoil from a gauntlet shot and puncture a lung and then die,” Barton pointed out. He was messing around with his bow, duct tape, and three scalpels. Tony was vaguely curious about what exactly he was trying to do, but he also was having a difficult time caring about anything other than-
The phone rang.

Tony scrambled for it, making Bruce yelp and fumble for the end of the bandage. Tony ignored his fussing and picked up. “Steve?”

“They found her,” Steve said. “It’s not good.”

Tony’s heart stopped.

Steve kept talking, something about critical condition and being rushed to a hospital, but Tony’s ears were ringing and he couldn’t hear.

“Bruce,” he said, and stood up. “I need a car.”
Jane poked at the scepter. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, but I was sure before I started hitting myself with gamma rays, and we all know how that turned out,” Bruce said, running a scanner over the scepter.

Jane laughed and lapsed back into a comfortable silence.

She was technically supposed to be working on the astrophysics research that Tony was funding, but Erik was off somewhere in Thailand checking out rumors of a gravitational anomaly - Jane was still pissed she hadn’t gotten to go, but Erik pointed out she had gone to the last such rumor, and she reluctantly caved - and she needed him to wake up and check her calculations before she could proceed. So she’d wandered into Bruce’s lab, which took up the other half of the third R&D floor down from the penthouse.

Jane liked to watch the other scientist work. His field was so different from her own, but she had always been interested in just about anything that came under the heading of “science,” and he focused on it as intensely as she did her own.

They’d had one interesting conversation the first time she did this, a week ago - four days after the Battle of New York. Fury wanted them to jump right on studying the scepter, and Darcy set Jane an alarm to remind her to eat. She realized Bruce probably hadn’t eaten either and took him a plate of food.

He’d given her a weird look, and she called him on it.

“Most people are too frightened to work with me once they know… about the other guy,” he said at last, picking at the omelette.”

Jane had said, “Well, you’re under control now, right? So we’re good?”

“...Yes.”

Since then, they had wandered into each other’s labs at least once a day, and occasionally Tony joined the unofficial science powwows. Jane had discovered that while neither of them was an expert in astrophysics, they could help her work through problems, and she could do the same for them.

Her StarkPad, which she’d been issued when she started at Stark Industries, buzzed. Bruce’s dinged at the same time. They exchanged looks before grabbing the clear black-edged tablets.

Steve’s face appeared on both. “Bruce, Jane,” he greeted. “We have a meeting upstairs in three minutes. Are you in the middle of anything?”

“Nothing that can’t be put on pause,” Bruce said. “What’s going on? Is everything okay?”

Jane and Steve both knew he meant, *is there any news of Loki?*
“Everything’s fine,” Steve said. “Bring anything conclusive that you have on the scepter. Thor will be here in ten with Fury.”

Jane’s eyes narrowed. “When is he leaving?”

“Today,” Steve said, and hung up.

Bruce and Jane exchanged a glance and simultaneously began putting Bruce’s computer network to sleep.

Bruce collected Tony from the floor above on the way. Tony came out and Jane’s eyes widened at his appearance: bags under his eyes, greasy, messy hair, and a sickly pale shade to his skin. He looked like Jane had after she spent four consecutive days awake when she was an intern, drinking straight drip coffee every hour and running nine different experiments.

Queasy guilt immediately hit Jane’s stomach. She had forgotten, in the glow of new data on Einstein-Rosen bridges that had significantly advanced her hypotheses after better readings on Thor’s more recent arrivals, that Pepper was still in the hospital in critical condition.

The three of them emerged from the stairwell, blinking, and found Steve, Maria, Clint, and Darcy sitting around the conference table. Clint looked half asleep, Darcy was on her phone, and Steve and Maria were sitting very straight. The Loki-shaped dent in the floor was still there, to Jane’s delight.

She took the empty seat next to Darcy, who was leaning back and texting furiously. She was the sole exception to the tense atmosphere around the table.

“What’s going on?” Jane asked.

“What’s going on is that Sir Asshole is about to leave and he’s insisting on taking the Tesseract with him,” Darcy said without looking up. “As you might guess, it’s making a lot of people pissed.”

“Lemme guess,” Tony said distractedly, wandering toward the bar. “Fury wants to keep it, Steve and Maria want it gone, you think I’m going to want to keep it, and everyone else is on the fence?”

“Steve and I are on the fence too,” Maria said. “But, yes, you’re mostly correct.”

“I usually am,” Tony said, and poured himself a glass of something golden and sharp-scented. Jane didn’t care for liquor - she didn’t understand why anyone would voluntarily deprive themselves of their rationality - but she got the feeling it was rather a lot of alcohol, especially for ten in the morning.

As Tony came and collapsed into a seat, Jane stared incredulously around the table. Most of them seemed hesitant. Did they not understand this?

“The Tesseract is dangerous,” Steve said.

Jane fixed him with a glare. “So are you. So is everyone at this table.” Maria, Clint, and Steve looked at her with shock as she continued. “Do you know how easy it would be for me to set up an Einstein-Rosen bridge to fail and release an energy blast that would vaporize everyone within five hundred miles? Very. Easy. I can’t make them work right but I know how to make one go badly wrong. Everyone at this table is dangerous, but that doesn’t mean we’re locked up or buried. We know this technology exists now, and we can’t just - just bury our heads in the sand! We have an opportunity here, and we should use it!”
“Jane,” Steve said. “It’s already been shown that the Tesseract can be used just as easily by the wrong hands as the right.”

“And you’re always right, aren’t you?” Darcy asked. Jane glanced over. Darcy was on Twitter now. How does she do that?

Steve glanced at Darcy, but Jane couldn’t read his expression. People weren’t her area of expertise. “My point is that it’s an incredible opportunity,” she snapped. “For - for humans as a whole! If we can understand what the Tesseract is, where it comes from…”

“It is an Infinity Stone,” Thor said.

The team whipped around, Clint coming awake all at once with a knife in his hand, aimed at the intruder.

“Oh,” he said, and yawned. “You.”

Thor ignored him and strode through the open balcony doors. “The Tesseract is an object of limitless energy with powers over space and travel. It is far too dangerous to be trusted to human hands.”

“Way to put your foot in your mouth, big guy,” Darcy muttered when Jane splayed her hands flat on the table.

“This is ridiculous,” Jane snapped, standing up so she could look Thor in the eye. Or closer to it, at least. “Asgard is lightyears ahead of Earth’s technology! This is a chance for humans to begin our own advancement! To provide clean energy and protect our planet, to make the kinds of scientific discoveries that haven’t been seen since - ever! It would be an unprecedented rate of advancement-”

“And there’s the rub,” Darcy said, watching Thor. “Odin’s got his panties in a twist because he’s afraid Earth will catch up to his high-and-mightiness. It’s harder to rule the ants when the ants have guns too.”

Thor’s jaw tightened visibly, and Jane saw, to her shock, that Darcy was right. She had thought - she didn’t know what she’d thought. People weren’t her strong suit. That Thor was afraid, yes - trying to protect humans, sure, even if he was being an idiot about it - but this?

“Thor,” Bruce said. “Why don’t you give us a minute.”

Thor nodded once, tightly, and stalked out of the room.

Tony was halfway through his drink and looked self-destructive, which was consistent with the image he’d worn the last week when he wasn’t at the hospital. Jane noticed him surreptitiously checking his StarkPhone every few minutes and concluded that in all probability he was either checking for updates or looking at the time so he could go back. Jane decided she wouldn’t find any help there and faced off with Steve. “We can’t let him take it,” she argued.

“Jane, do you know who I am?” Steve asked.

She paused. “Captain America. Except you don’t want to be called that anymore. If you’re asking whether or not I know my history, yes, I am aware of your abilities-”

“The organization known as Hydra, which was the primary opponent I fought in the war, had their hands on the Tesseract,” Steve said heavily. “They made energy weapons of unfathomable power with it. The strength of a nuclear blast contained and focused into firearms that could be aimed at a single person with no fallout, no radiation. The consequences of that technology falling into the
wrong hands were devastating. We almost lost.”

“So we’re more careful this time,” Jane argued. “We have the Tesseract right now, not Hydra! Not even SHIELD! We can work on it here with SHIELD funding and SHIELD scientists but we control it. You can’t just resist progress because it’s dangerous. If we did that, we would live in a society where books and the Internet were banned or censored!”

“Jane’s right,” Darcy said. She was still leaning back and looked bored with their conversation, but her tone was focused, firm. Jane knew that because she knew Darcy. “It’s like a power tool. Anything powerful can be used by the good guys or the bad ones. The Internet? Chainsaws? I mean, come on, Steve, what exactly would you call predator drones?”

“I’m not so sure we’re the good guys,” Tony muttered. “At least judging from the television. And who wants to be a good guy anyway? The villains get the best lines.”

Steve rubbed his forehead. “My point is that I’ve already seen what kind of damage this thing can do.”

“And we’ve all seen the kind of damage he can do,” Darcy said, and pointed at Bruce.

Steve shot her a look.

“What? It’s true,” Darcy insisted. “He’s the Hulk, people! And I’m not saying we need to lock him up or anything. I’m saying that studying what exactly happened to Brucie could be useful in some sciencey way and we shouldn’t either slit his throat or dump him in a hole or shoot him into space or some shit just because he could go ape on us and we wouldn’t be able to contain him.”

“I’m not sure whether or not that was a compliment,” Bruce said, but Jane didn’t think he looked angry. Though she could be wrong. When she was wrong it was usually about people.

Darcy twiddled her fingers at him. “There was probably one buried in there somewhere.”

“So we keep the Tesseract,” Steve said. “Clint? Maria? You’ve been oddly quiet.”

Clint blinked and sat up straighter. “Whaa?”

“Pay attention,” Steve said.

Clint threw up his hands. “I haven’t slept in forty-three hours!”

The rest of the team stared at him.

He sighed. “Fury has me helping with shadowing some gang that’s in the city right now. A crew he suspects lifted four million dollars’ worth of weapons from a transport convoy in Spain last month, but there’s not enough evidence. And on top of the fact that now, according to the media, I’m an Avenger - yeah. No sleep for me. Tony, can your robots make sandwiches?”

Tony waved a hand toward the makeshift kitchen that had sprung up to the side of the bar in a way that could have been either affirmative or negative. Clint stood up and walked over there. “I see both sides of this one. I’m gonna sit it out. Just, if we keep the thing, let’s not try making any more portals for a good while. Once was enough.”

“Well, we didn’t get a chance to really study the quantum fields generated around the portal, or gravitational anomalies at the portal’s lip, or-”
“Jane, you’re not helping your argument,” Darcy said.

Jane stopped talking and kept herself focused with an effort; her mind wanted to keep hypothesizing about the effects of the portal on gravity, light, sound, and atmosphere, but it was socially abnormal to check out of an argument in which one was participating, so she made herself stay in the moment.

Jane realized that everyone, even Tony, was looking at Maria.

The woman raised her eyebrows at them. “Oh, it’s coming down to me now?”

“We’re a team,” Clint called. “And like it or not, you and I are on it.”

“Speaking of which, where’s Natasha?” Steve asked Clint.

Jane eyed Clint’s coffee while he shrugged. “Fury has her busy with something or other. She’s lying low for a bit. There’s footage of her during the fight and talk of the “Black Widow”. Apparently the SHIELD higher-ups aren’t too happy about it.” Clint glanced at them once, poured three more cups of coffee, and balanced all four mugs over until he could slide one each in front of Jane, Bruce, and Tony. Jane murmured “thanks”.

“And what would she say?” Steve asked Clint.

“Keep it,” Clint replied without hesitation. “She’d see its potential as a weapon and say keep it. It is somewhat concerning that we know about all these alien cultures with weapons way ahead of ours who could probably stomp us out before breakfast.”

“Hmmm,” Steve said.

Maria took a deep breath. Jane opened her mouth but Darcy shot her a look and Jane closed it again.

“If we do keep the cube… we don’t give it to Fury,” Maria said.

Darcy leaned forward. “You say that like every word cost you a hundred bucks.”

“I’m disobeying orders and the trust of my organization,” Maria said. “But I think it needs to be said. Fury is many things, but I think we’ve already seen he’s too secretive to allow this project to fall into only his own hands.”

Jane noticed that Clint was staring at her.

“There’s one other thing,” Bruce said. “The scepter? I’ve been going through my initial readings, and… The signature is disguised and I don’t want to break the casing for fear of setting off an explosion, but I suspect that there is a power source within it that is equal to the Tesseract.”

Darcy’s eyes widened. “Does Thor know that? Or Fury?”

Bruce shook his head. “No one does.”

“I have a plan,” Darcy began.

The balcony doors flew open, and Thor stormed in, just as the sound of helicopter rotors split the air and a SHIELD bird came in for landing on the pad. Fury leaped out and walked toward them, followed by three technicians carrying a case.

The Tesseract.
“We’ve decided,” Jane announced. “We will be keeping the Tesseract.”

“Jane, you do not understand that with which you tamper,” Thor said, raising Mjolnir in her direction.

Tony, Steve, and Maria were instantly on their feet facing him.

Thor looked taken aback. “I would not harm her-”

“Then maybe don’t point a weapon in her direction,” Maria said. “Here on backwards Midgard, we call that threatening behavior.”

Thor slowly lowered Mjolnir.

“I hate to break up the reunion,” Fury drawled, “but it seems that we need a mediator for this family drama.”

“I can mediate,” Darcy said. “Thor, calm down, we’re keeping the Tesseract. See? Mediation.”

“I think Fury meant himself,” Clint said.

Steve raised his eyebrows. “With all due respect, sir, I don’t think ‘mediation’ is your strong suit.”

“You may be right,” Fury said. “I want to keep the Tesseract, Thor. What are you going to do?”

“It is too much a risk to leave in human hands,” Thor said. “I must insist on returning it to safety in Asgard’s vaults.”

“No,” Darcy said flatly. “You have enough relics. The Tesseract will sit and collect dust and get forgotten in the stagnation of the Asgardian people. We’re keeping it.”

“Stagn- no. The Tesseract comes with me.” Thor’s fists were clenched. “If need be, though it pains me greatly to consider, I will remove it from your possession with force.”

“You can’t beat all of us,” Steve said flatly.

Thor looked around, and Jane saw him noticing Bruce’s deceptively calm demeanor, Clint and Maria’s quiet wariness, the supersoldier and the genius inventor, and realize that they were right.

His eyes skipped right over Jane and Darcy in what Jane concluded was a warrior’s threat assessment. Jane examined herself and decided that made her irritated.

“Then I will return with Asgard’s forces and overpower you,” Thor said heavily. “My - friends, will you not listen? I am trying only to protect you from yourselves.”

“If we give up the Tesseract, then we keep the scepter,” Darcy said.

Silence fell.

“Loki’s… scepter?” Thor looked confused. “It has power beyond Loki himself?”

“It appears to be independent of Loki,” Bruce said. “Beyond that, we cannot tell what it is or how to wield it, but I… can accept this compromise.”

“Darcy-” Jane began.
Darcy shot her a look that seemed to be loudly telegraphing a message that Jane couldn’t decipher. “No, Jane, let’s not start a war with Asgard over the glowy cube of death. Bad plan.”

Jane gritted her teeth and decided to trust her friend.

“Captain?” Fury said. “Stark?”

“I’m donating ten million dollars to start a fund for those injured in the battle,” Tony said. “I need to go… see Pepper.”

Fury sighed. “Stark, have you even been listening?”

“Keep the scepter,” Tony said. “Sounds good. I’m leaving.” He stood up and left, moving gingerly.

Steve watched him go with worry in his eyes. “This seems… an acceptable compromise.”

Clint waved a hand.

“Thor, can you take this deal?” Fury asked Thor.

Thor frowned at Jane. “Lady Jane, will you not simply yield-”

“Nope,” she said.

“Then I will take the Tesseract and leave you Loki’s weapon,” Thor said, and held out a hand to Fury.

After a long, tense moment, in which Jane began to wonder whether Fury still considered the Avengers his subordinates or would let them make their own decisions, the SHIELD director nodded, and his lackeys handed over the case.

“Thank you,” Thor said.

“Thor, I would like a word before you leave,” Fury said.

Thor nodded once, and the two men walked out onto the balcony and stopped next to the helicopter while Fury’s entourage climbed on board. With the doors closed, it was impossible to hear what was said, but both of their faces were serious.

“So he’s treating us like a team now,” Steve said at last.

“Aren’t we?” Jane said.

Steve shrugged. “Not like I have anywhere else to be.”

“What was that display?” Maria asked.

Jane realized she was examining Darcy.

Darcy sat back and raised her eyebrows. “A negotiation.”

“For the scepter,” Maria said.

Darcy smirked. “Thor wasn’t gonna back down anytime soon on the Tesseract, and Bruce just told us that the scepter has something in it potentially just as powerful as the Tesseract. I pushed Thor about the Tesseract so he’d see my other option as a reasonable compromise and leave the scepter
Comprehension dawned. Jane shook her head and sat down. “This is why I let you handle the people side of things,” she muttered.

Darcy laughed.

Steve and Maria had an expression on their faces that Jane recognized as the one people wore when they realized they’d been significantly underestimating Darcy Lewis. Jane smiled to see her friend taking her place among these people and holding her own. Darcy’s genius was subtler than Jane’s, and less appreciated, but certainly still there.

“Now the real question is, do we tell Fury what’s in the scepter?” Darcy asked.

Steve blew out a breath and sat back. “I don’t fully trust him.”

“He has access to way more money and personnel than we do,” Jane pointed out.

“Jane, you work for Tony Stark now, remember? You’ve got at least as much access as Fury,” Darcy pointed out. “And I don’t trust Fury either. Giving a clandestine government organization access to this kind of power with no checks? I can’t imagine how that could go wrong. Oh, wait, let me think…” She tapped her chin, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

“Somehow I think she’s being sarcastic,” Clint stage whispered.

“I do think we should keep him involved,” Steve added. “He means well, and there are worse people in this world to be part of this project. And that way we can have access to all his old Tesseract files.”

“But how do we know he’s actually giving us the information?” Darcy argued.

“Tony will take care of that,” Jane said confidently.

Darcy sighed. “Fine, you’ve made your case. I’m not telling him, though. I have a date in an hour and I need to go change.”

“A date?” Jane asked.

Darcy shot her a look. “I do have a life. See ya.”

She vanished into the elevator.

Steve stood up as well. “I’ll go speak with the Director. Clint? Maria? Do you need anything?”

“I’m on permanent assignment to you as a point person for the media,” Maria said. “There’s footage of me from the battle, so people recognize me, and I mostly operated in an administrative capacity anyway, a lot of which I can handle digitally. Clint’s been recalled, effective tomorrow. Fury says the world is in upheaval right now and he can’t give us a honeymoon.”

“Come on,” Jane said to Bruce. “Let’s get back to the scepter.”

She was a scientist. All this social networking was tedious and frustrating and would just be so much simpler if everyone just said what they meant, but no, it had to be secrets and hidden motivations and lying. Things Jane didn’t know, not like she did her physics: nebulae and plasma and quantum fields.

But if that was the price she had to pay for this chance, she would pay it.
Hi guys! Sorry this update is a little slower than usual. School is interfering; I have finals this week.

I also should warn you that this chapter, the next one, and possibly the one after that are fairly dialogue-heavy. It's a bit of an intermediary section between the battle of New York and when things start picking up again. ;) I did my best to keep it interesting; sorry if things aren't as fast-paced as they have been!
Darcy scowled through the one-way glass. “Why are reporters always like this?”

“It’s their job,” Steve said mildly at her side.

Darcy raised an eyebrow at him. “To be obnoxious little shits?”

“To be pushy and get answers,” he countered. “The media is an effective check against government.”

“Not anymore,” Darcy muttered. “They’re all out for personal gain and scandals and the latest heartstring-puller that will boost their blog hits. It’s a celebrity culture where viewers value numbing reality TV over world events and awareness of politics.”

Steve frowned. “I had no idea you cared so much.”

“I majored in poly sci,” Darcy said. “Kinda opens your eyes. That’s why I’m on Stark’s PR team.”

“And why you’ve been appointed the official Avengers media liaison,” Maria said from behind them.

Darcy squeaked and turned around. “What?”

“Just got off the phone with Fury a few minutes ago,” Maria said. “We’re not exactly keeping a low profile here. It’s been two weeks since the battle of New York, as they’re calling it, and we’ve got Captain America, the Hulk, Jane Foster, and Tony Stark all living in the same building, which also happens to have a giant neon “A” on the outside and SHIELD helicopters flying in at odd hours. People notice. We need an official point person, and I talked Fury into letting it be you. The rest of the team agrees.”

“Shouldn’t it be Tony?” Darcy said, though she desperately wanted to say yes.

Maria raised her eyebrows. “Did you see him this morning?”

“Touche,” Darcy said, and looked back at the pack of nine reporters and their photographers waiting for her. It wasn’t a proper press conference; it wasn’t being filmed, but it was close enough. Her palms tingled. This was so much better than being a science intern. Sorry, Jane.

“I’m worried about him,” Steve said. “He falls asleep in the lab and he twitches and cries out in his sleep.”

“PTSD,” Darcy said. “Seen it before.”

The other two stared at her.

“My dad,” she said, and didn’t offer any more information. “Someone should talk to Tony. Not you,” she added to Steve. “He’d just get defensive. You were his hero when he was four and he hated you by the time he was six. It’s pretty clear Howard wasn’t the best daddy and little Tony clearly got annoyed that you were the Golden Boy he could never outdo in his father’s mind. He’ll
get defensive if you criticize him. Let Bruce handle it.”

Steve’s mouth was open halfway. Darcy reached out and closed it with a click.

After a moment, the blond supersoldier nodded once, and Darcy beamed back. “Great. Now, unless there’s something else…”

“Nope,” Maria said.

“Then I will see on the other side,” Darcy said dramatically, straightened her jacket, and pushed open the door.

Instantly, the reporters perked up.

“Miss Lewis,” the CNN guy said. “Thank you for agreeing to take my questions today.”

“I agreed to take questions from all of you,” Darcy said, and took a seat at the head of the conference table. There was a scramble as the other reporters fought for seats nearest her and their photographers jockeyed for the best angles. “Let’s just go around one by one, shall we?”

The Fox woman dove in immediately. “Miss Lewis, is it true that the Avengers team is secretly funded by Russia?”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but Iron Man happens to be Tony Stark, one of the richest men in the world,” Darcy said pleasantly. “We would hardly need Russian funding even if it were offered. Which it has not been.”

A light laugh ran around the table. Pleased, Darcy relaxed and began to field questions, playing word games and watching them get more and more frustrated as even their most pointed inquiries got nothing but a smile and a polite response. She told the truth in such a way that they’d never possibly be able to use it against the Avengers.

“Miss Lewis,” the CNN man said again. “What do you say to the critics who claim the Avengers are responsible for the deaths in the Battle of New York?”

“You’ve probably seen the alien army that came pouring through a portal in the sky,” Darcy said. “I would lay the blame for the casualties on their shoulders.”

“There are those who say the Avengers caused the damage and should pay retribution.”

“Ten million dollars has already been donated by Tony Stark, the man called “narcissistic” on a daily basis in the tabloids, to a hospital fund. I assure you that decision was originally from Mr. Stark in its entirety. Captain Rogers, Jane Foster, and Bruce Banner have all participated in fundraising events to repair the damage, fund treatment for the injured, and help families who could otherwise not afford funerals for their loved ones. I’m not sure what other “retribution” you’d like paid.” Darcy was starting to get annoyed, but she kept her polite face on even as a slight edge crept into her tone.

CNN leaned forward a little more. Darcy examined him more closely, as she used to her debate opponents in college: mousy hair, crooked nose, freckles. He was taller than Stark but shorter than Steve.

“What can you tell me of the Avengers’ involvement with SHIELD?” he asked.

“SHIELD is a clandestine military intelligence and security division of the United States government,” Darcy said. “Two of their agents are on temporary leave to work with the Avengers,
as the team was assembled in part by SHIELD. We are… consultants, you might say, but not fully under SHIELD jurisdiction.”

“What about the rumors that the Avengers are a cover-up for SHIELD’s failures?” the man asked.

“I have heard no such rumors,” Darcy said. “If I did, I would say they were false.”

“And are they false?”

“Are you calling me a liar, Mr… Bord?” Darcy asked, squinting at his nametag.

Several of the other reporters looked uncomfortable, but the majority were eagerly leaning forward, waiting.

Bord smiled. “I’m asking you if the rumors are false.”

“If any such rumors exist, yes, they are false. Have you any more questions?” Darcy kept her face bland and her tone smooth, but there was a challenge in the reporter’s eyes, and she couldn’t resist meeting it.

“Yes. Where are the Avengers now? What are your plans for the future?”

“We are assisting with the cleanup of New York,” Darcy said. “We plan to continue doing so and to continue serving the purpose SHIELD created us for: to be a shield for the people of this world.” She checked her watch and cut the reporters off. “That’s all I have time for.”

“One more question,” Bord insisted, blocking her path to the door. “Miss Lewis, nobody seems to know what you are to the Avengers. Would you care to clear that up?”

Darcy smiled at him, and this time, she let a hint of a bite creep through the politeness. “I’m the Avengers press liaison,” she said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

She stepped around him as if he were a piece of furniture and left the conference room.

Darcy watched through the glass as the reporters packed up and left. Bord was the slowest, and she noticed for the first time that he didn’t seem to have a cameraman.

Odd.

The CNN reporter left with his colleagues, and Darcy watched with narrowed eyes. She’d have to keep an eye on him. Look into what he wrote for the news, his social media - honestly, it was so easy these days.

Darcy smiled and turned around, heading back for the elevators to the upper levels.

It looked like she had a new opponent.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stark Tower

May 2011

“We need a meeting,” Tony announced.

Clint glanced up. “Hey, man. Nice to see you without bags under your eyes.”

“Darcy attacked him with a makeup brush,” Maria said. “Something about how it’s terrible PR for
the media to keep slinging these pictures around of him looking like a meth addict.”

“I have never looked like a meth addict,” Tony said.

Clint silently pulled up a photograph on his phone and showed it to Tony, who winced. “Okay,
that’s bad. Meeting. Now.”

“Are we seriously having a meeting because you had bedhead for two weeks? Is Pepper better? Is
that what’s going on?” Clint asked. He had training to do this morning before he hopped a copter
back to HQ.

“No, we’re having a meeting because Tony needs a life raft and he named it the Avengers,” Darcy
said, walking into the training room. “You seen the scary one?”

“Which scary one?” Clint asked.

Darcy pointed at him. “I like you. The spidery scary one with red hair.”

Clint felt his face darken. “On a mission for Fury. He’s got her undercover somewhere. She’s
coming in for a report next week. I’ll see her then.”

“Okiedoke,” Darcy said agreeably. “Come on, old guy, we’ve got a meeting.”

Clint followed after her, shouting, “I am not old!”

Tony’s laughter chased Clint down the hallway.

It sounded almost normal - almost like the Tony Stark that Clint had seen on occasion when he was
consulting for Fury. But Clint also suspected that Darcy was right. Tony was covering his grief and
worry by throwing himself into other things: first his inventing, now this.

Clint walked into the penthouse, which had been sort of an unofficial common room for the lot of
them while they helped clean up the aftermath of New York. He wasn’t really sure what was going
to happen now that that job was winding down. Bruce, Jane, Darcy, and obviously Stark all had
reason to stay here, and Steve wasn’t precisely a SHIELD agent, but Clint knew he and Maria would
be recalled to base within a week at least. And then…

Then he would be back out on field ops, and Maria’d be stuck back at Fury’s side again.

Clint found himself wishing this didn’t have to end.
“Okay,” Steve said, and sat down at the table’s head. Tony paused and stared at him for a second before sitting at the table’s opposite end. “Now that we’re all here…”

Clint sat down next to Maria, who shot him a quicksilver smile. Jane, Darcy, and Bruce were sitting on the other side, Darcy looking nonchalant as always. At least this time she wasn’t on her phone.

“…we have a decision to make,” Steve said. “About the fact that we were assembled to be a team, and now the threat we faced is gone.”

“The world needs this,” Tony said. “Us. There are things out there the normal military isn’t equipped to face.”

“We’ll lose three people to SHIELD here soon,” Steve countered. “Four, if Fury has more field missions for me.”

“That doesn’t mean we can’t come back together,” Tony said. “I’m not going anywhere, and I assume Bruce and Jane haven’t got anywhere better to be.”

Jane glanced up at her name. “What?”

“We’re discussing whether or not this little merry band of men is gonna dis band,” Darcy said. “Do you have any gum?”

Tony tossed her a piece. “And we’d be lost without our press liaison.”

Darcy shrugged. “You give me hazard pay, so I’m not going anywhere.”

“Why would I leave?” Jane asked, still looking confused.

“Exactly,” Darcy said with satisfaction.

Jane stared at her for a second, then dismissed it. “Okay. Tony, do you have a laser ablation solid-particle beam apparatus? The one I had shipped up here from Colorado is falling apart.”

“JARVIS, order a laser ablation apparatus whatever-she-just-called-it,” Tony said. “Send Jane the specs so she can approve the order. Does that work, Foster?”

“Thanks,” Jane said.

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS said.

Jane asked, “I have the HRTEM running and it’s supposed to finish in… three minutes, so is there anything else you need me for?”

“Nope,” Darcy said.

Jane patted her friend’s shoulder awkwardly and stood up.

“Enjoy your science,” Steve said.

“Ask Darcy,” Jane said absently, and left the room at a brisk walk.

Clint realized he was smiling. He liked these people.

Too much.
“Okay, so we’re the Avengers, we fight evil people, blah blah blah,” Darcy said. “We can find each other again next time a genocidal maniac from outer space tries to take over the planet.”

Steve shook his head. “I think we could focus on Earth problems, too. There was a militant group in Russia three months ago who raped and pillaged their way for four weeks through the countryside before the UN passed a vote to send in troops and stop them. Even then, it’s estimated that less than half of the perpetrators were arrested for human rights violations or killed when they resisted - the others are still out there. We could’ve gone in and stopped them at the beginning. Saved hundreds of lives.”

Darcy blinked at him. “You want to keep doing this. Like, for a while.”

“Why not?” Steve asked.

“No oversight?” Tony said.

Bruce glanced around. “I’m not sure who I trust as oversight. Not Fury, not the United Nations, and definitely not the United States government.”

“Why not the US?” Clint asked. Distrust of Fury, he’d expected, and he understood where Bruce was coming from on the UN - they were notoriously slow to decide anything, and many crises could only be effectively averted within their early stages. Waiting for a vote would be excruciating. But the U.S. government?

Bruce opened his mouth and paused.

“Bruce’s good friend Thaddeus Ross is the Secretary of State,” Darcy said. When Clint looked at her, she was smirking. “And we all know how Ross feels about the Hulk.”

Bruce blew out a breath. “Yeah, there’s that.”

“So we work with Fury, but not under him,” Steve suggested. “SHIELD can provide good backup. Not to mention legitimacy.”

“And that means so much to you, does it?” Tony muttered.

Steve glared at him. “What would you suggest, vigilantism?”

“Sometimes vigilantes get stuff done,” Tony said. “Sometimes the law is more of a hindrance than a help. I’m not taking Fury’s orders.”

“And sometimes laws are laws for a reason,” Steve countered. “I’m not saying we follow SHIELD orders, I’m saying we work with them. We get backup, they get a strike team who can do things no one else on Earth can.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Such a good little soldier. Captain America, golden boy-”

“I told you, that’s not who I am anymore,” Steve snapped.

Clint sat up straight at the sudden increase in tension.

Steve and Tony stared at each other.

Maria stepped in. “Stark, he’s not asking you to follow Fury’s orders, and he’s not planning on doing so himself,” she said quietly.
Tony relented. “If that’s what it takes.”

“So to clarify,” Clint said, “you want to stay as a team. Officially “The Avengers.” And keep doing… high-profile save-the-world type missions?”

“Well, statistically, events with the potential to literally end the world are quite rare,” Bruce said.

Steve rubbed his temple. Clint was noticing that the supersoldier often did that when frustrated, annoyed, or stressed. “I’m saying that we’re a team now. You don’t go through a battle like the one we fought two weeks ago and not come out as a unit, no matter how... diverse... our abilities might be. Teams should stick together. And I think we have the potential to do a lot of good.”

“Some missions will be lower-profile,” Tony said. He seemed to have accepted the compromise and moved on. Clint was slightly surprised, but then again, Tony seemed pretty invested in this plan. “Small insertions, limited scope - just a few people, those with the most applicable skill sets.”

Clint admitted to himself that it was tempting. To stop running all the time, to have a place to crash and people who knew him? That was a luxury Clint had not been afforded since SHIELD cleared him for field ops. He was a spy and an assassin; he had no illusions about himself, and this kind of life - he couldn’t stay tied down for long. It placed those around him at risk. He had had four people on the planet who knew him, who he (more or less) trusted: Maria, Tasha, Fury, and Coulson. That was down to three.

For a second, Clint saw a different life, in which he met someone who taught him to settle down. Who took him on another path, one where he grew into a person who could want domestic life, a settled family.

He wasn’t that person, because that had never happened. And the people he considered family would never be that. Clint loved them all the more for it.

Clint found himself wanting this. But he didn’t think he could be a SHIELD agent and an Avenger at the same time.

He glanced at Maria. She looked deep in thought as well, although he suspected no one else at the table would be able to tell. Maria had to be feeling just as conflicted here; she was Fury’s right hand now with Coulson gone, but this was a chance to do something that promised to be pretty damn interesting.

Not to mention the upcoming meeting with Tasha’s contact in Russia. Clint gripped his knees as he realized that Fury would have to send him after Tasha when she went rogue with her Soldier, as Clint knew she planned to do.

So he was done with SHIELD either way.

“Clint?”

Clint looked up and realized everyone at the table was staring at him.

“Sorry, what’d I miss?” he asked.

“What could you possibly have been thinking about more interesting than this conversation?” Tony said.

Clint leaned back. “Sandwiches.”
“Must have been one hell of a sandwich.”

“It tasted terrible. I think it had your sense of humor on it,” Clint fired back.

Steve, Darcy, and Tony laughed. Maria looked like she was repressing a smile and Bruce allowed himself a small chuckle.

“What’s your take on this idea?” Steve asked.

Clint glanced at Maria. “I’m in.”

“Yes,” Darcy said. “I won’t be the only normal person in this group.”

“What are Jane and I, your pets?” Tony asked.

“You and Jane both have at least like forty percent of your brain screws loose. I rest my case.”

Tony looked offended.

Clint met Maria’s eyes and raised his brows.

“I can’t just… quit SHIELD,” she said quietly. “And neither can you,” she added. “Not that easily. It’s not like flipping burgers. SHIELD isn’t something you just walk away from.”

“I’ll request a long-term reassignment,” Clint said.

“He can keep doing things for His Blindness,” Darcy agreed, and Clint snorted.

“Can I please tell Fury about that nickname?”

Darcy grinned. “Be my guest.”

“Do we have to decide now?” Maria asked.

Steve shook his head. “It’s just something to consider.”

Maria nodded, lips tight.

Darcy leaned forward slightly.

Alarm bells went off in Clint’s head: she was hiding something. He couldn’t have said how he knew that, but he did.

“Glad we cleared that up,” Darcy said. “Because I have something I have to tell you.”

Clint was clearly not the only one who’d picked up on the caginess. Steve was frowning, Tony was tapping his arc reactor the way he did when tense, and Bruce had sat up straighter, which is about all the reaction he would show. Even Maria had subtly focused in on Darcy.

The press liaison took a deep breath. “Loki didn’t kill Coulson. Thor did.”

Chapter End Notes
Sorry for the wait! This is the crunch time that I've been anticipating. I think I'm going to have to decelerate my updates to every 2-4 days instead of every 1-2. Apologies to everyone for that and for the cliffhanger!

Actually, never mind, I'm not sorry about the cliffhanger. :)
Deafening silence echoed for several seconds.

Darcy kept her chin up, meeting all their incredulous eyes one by one.

“I’m sorry, what?” Tony snapped, leaning forward with his palms flat to the table.

Darcy just nodded.

She glanced around again and gauged their reactions. Maria was mostly expressionless, but there was a tic in her jaw. Clint’s shock, anger, and grief were visible in the line of his mouth and the set of his eyebrows. Bruce - Bruce just looked stunned.

And Tony was furious. Predictably.

“How do you know this?” Steve said measuredly.

Darcy took a breath. “I was there,” she said, and told them the story: watching Romanoff’s conversation with Loki, her own odd interchange with him, hiding in the viewing room, and watching the fight. She was glad Jane wasn’t here for this. Guilt twisted Darcy’s stomach. Jane hadn’t even questioned Darcy’s whereabouts during the helicarrier fight, and Darcy had taken advantage of her friend’s absentmindedness.

She’d have to tell Jane later.

“I ran out as soon as Loki was gone,” she said. “Coulson was still conscious. He told me there was a medical call box and I went and pulled the thing, and… I waited until the medical team showed up. Fury beat them there, but not by much.” She swallowed. “Coulson was… beyond saving.”

“Let me get this straight,” Tony snapped. Darcy was forcefully reminded that he was volatile at the moment, little more than a yawning pit of grief and worry with a precarious safety net of this group holding him up. “You knew this all along and didn’t say anything?”

“I was wondering if Fury would tell you,” Darcy said coldly, lifting her eyes to meet Tony’s. She didn’t regret her decision to keep the secret.

Tony opened his mouth again, but Maria talked over him. “You mean to tell us that Fury knew about this and kept it to himself.”

“Presumably so you would continue to work with Thor during the battle,” Darcy said. “Or to keep you pissed at Loki. Most likely both.”

“And you’re sure he knew the truth.” Maria’s jaw was set and her eyes glittered with either tears or anger. Darcy knew she had worked closely with Coulson - that they’d been friends.

Darcy hid her own grief. It was really all she knew to do with sadness: bury it under flippancy and
move on. “Like ninety-six percent. He chased me away. He was the one who heard Coulson’s last words - I could see them talking. What are the odds Coulson didn’t tell Fury? And then when Fury came and talked to me, he was asking all these pointed questions. I played the dumb bimbo and cried a lot and lied my ass off. I’m not sure he totally believed me but hey, I’m still breathing, so it must have been passable.”

Maria shook her head. “I can’t believe you lied to Nick Fury of all people and it worked.”

“More or less,” Darcy muttered.

“And you said Loki didn’t finish Coulson off,” Steve clarified.

Darcy shrugged. “He reached out like he was about to, but then he twitched and bolted like someone set his clothes on fire.” She paused. “That would’ve been kinda funny, actually…”

“Darcy,” Steve said.

“Steve,” she mimicked, and smirked when he blew out a sigh.

Tony stepped to the side and into Darcy’s direct line of sight, commanding her attention. “You’re almost as good at secret-keeping as Fury himself,” he accused.

“Wouldn’t have pegged you for a passive-aggressive one, Tony,” Darcy retorted. “I couldn’t contact you before the battle because you were stuck in the communications black hole around the helicarrier and then I was, oh, that’s right, drugged in your safe room, and I already explained why I’ve kept the secret from then until now. So I’d appreciate you not jumping down my throat.”

Amazingly, Tony backed down, although he didn’t apologize. Darcy didn’t mind - she didn’t apologize, either, not if she could help it.

“I noticed a lot of weird things, actually,” Darcy said. “First of all, the whole invasion plan? It was really fucking stupid. He started in Germany, of all places he could’ve chosen, and made a huge show as a dictator, which got the attention of the entire world focused on him. I find it hard to accept that he didn’t do any research beforehand. And a choke-point invasion with an army on a connected neural network? Not a good plan. Especially since, according to Thor, Loki is a brilliant strategist and battle commander. And then there’s the whole thing with the scepter. I’ve been through the footage, heard all your reports. Did no one else notice that Loki took off after he got Hulk-smashed and left the scepter lying there? The key to the portal and his main weapon through this whole fiasco?”

“Darcy, what are you suggesting?” Bruce asked.

Darcy met his eyes. “I’m not suggesting anything. I’m merely asking if anyone else noticed something a little weird.”

“I have.”

They all turned to look at Maria.

The dark-haired agent straightened her spine. “Darcy raised several excellent points. I’m reminded of the fact that someone had to order Selvig to build that fail-safe into the portal. I remember what it was like under the scepter’s influence. There was no independent thought, no room for me to have taken any action like that.” Though she remained stoic, Darcy detected nervousness or tension in her voice, and she definitely noticed how Clint oriented himself slightly toward Maria as she spoke, as if to provide an almost-undetectable support network.
“I agree,” Tony said, to Darcy’s surprise. His hatred of Loki was so strong, she’d expected him to be the most resilient to accepting any idea other than the one they’d been presented with.

But then again, she realized, a large part of that hatred had come from Coulson’s death. If Loki wasn’t the perpetrator…

This is great.

“But how do we find out for sure?” Steve asked. “This is all… speculation.”

Maria, Tony, and Darcy all swiveled toward him incredulously, and he raised his hands. “I’m not discounting that you make interesting points,” he said defensively. “But we have no witnesses other than Darcy, and that was just for the fight in the helicarrier between Loki and Thor - it’s not like we can interview Loki.”

“Loki also said he wouldn’t be permitted to spare me if I interfered with that fight,” Darcy remembered. “So whose orders was he taking?”

“Are you suggesting that Loki was working for someone else?” Steve asked.

Darcy shrugged.

“We still face the same problem,” Bruce added after a moment. “We have no one to ask.”

Darcy held up her StarkPhone, Erik Selvig’s contact on the screen. “We can ask him.”

The phone rang, and rang, and rang.

Just when Darcy thought Erik wouldn’t pick up (she didn’t even know where he was in the world, much less the time there, but whatever), there was a click and his voice came over the line, scratchy but understandable. “Darcy?”

“Erik!” she said.

“Darcy, it’s the middle of the night here,” he complained.

“Pretend you’re dreaming or something. I need to ask you a question.”

“No.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to ask!”

“You’re calling me with a prank marriage proposal like last year on this date. No.”

Darcy checked her watch. “I’m insulted that you think I would try the same thing twice. Also, April Fools’ Day was a month and a half ago. It’s May.”

There was a burst of frantic shuffling from the other end, and then a muffled curse. “May,” he grumbled. “When did that happen?”

“Probably while you were under Loki’s mind control. Thanks for the segue. Who gave you the order to build a failsafe into the portal machine thing?”

Steve and Maria were staring at her with puzzled looks on their faces. Boy, did these soldier people need to lighten up. At least Clint and Tony were showing appropriate levels of appreciation for Darcy’s awesomeness. She grinned back at them.
“I already told you all, I don’t remember,” Erik said slowly.

“Okay, but could it possibly have been you?” Darcy asked. “Like… your own decision. That you built in secret. Or programmed. However you put commands into a machine that controls an alien space door thingy.”

“I don’t see how it could’ve been,” Erik replied. “He was… into everything. I was key to the plan, you know; he focused a lot of his… attention… on me. My head. There was - no room for deviation. But then again, there was no one giving orders except Loki.”

Darcy glanced up. Erik’s words had clearly reached the rest of the team. Steve and Bruce looked deep in thought, Clint troubled; Maria maintained her stony expression.

“Awesome,” Darcy said. “Thanks. Go back to sleep. This was just a dream.”

“Apparently even my subconscious can’t make you less annoying,” Erik muttered, and hung up.

Darcy snickered and tucked her phone away. “Well, I think we answered that one fairly well.”

“And then there’s the eyes,” Tony said. “Darcy, you said it was the blue eyes that tipped you off about Loki in the building? His eyes were bright blue when I… ran into him here.”

“You mean when he threw you out the window,” Darcy said, grinning.

Tony glared at her. “I’m in my forties, Lewis.”

“Poor old man. Loki’s older and he still kicked your ass.”

Steve jumped in. “That’s enough. Tony, Darcy… What are you suggesting?”

Darcy met Tony’s eyes.

“That Loki was under the influence of the scepter as well,” Tony said quietly.

Silence.

“I mean, all the evidence does seem to be pointing that way,” Darcy said. “And I know you’re not going to want to accept it, but… if someone else was controlling Loki, then maybe our problems aren’t over. And we can’t just bury our heads in the sand. Not if we want to actually do this Avenging schtick.”

“You seem to think that I’m going to just swallow the easy story without pause,” Steve said. His voice was measured but there was a challenge in his eyes.

Darcy leaned back. “Are you?”

“No,” he snapped.

She beamed. “Then we’re fine.”

“There’s not a lot we can do at the moment, though,” Bruce pointed out.

Darcy shrugged. “I can go deal with the guy who’s threatening to sue you for his Hulk-smashed building.”

“Shouldn’t a lawyer handle that?” Steve said.
Darcy smirked. “A lawyer can handle the court case. It’s my job to keep that court case from ever happening. Capiche?”

Steve looked confused.

Darcy ignored him. “‘Kay, I’m out. Text me if there’s any PR disasters I need to head off.”

She walked to the elevator with confidence in her step, but the second Darcy got inside it, she leaned against the wall with a long sigh. Her hands trembled slightly and she clenched them into fists.

Coulson was gone. Saying it… made it so much more real.

She missed the man.

And now she had to go talk to Jane about this.

Darcy allowed herself a count of thirty and then clamped down on her emotions. She got her posture and expression under control and left the elevator feeling much more like herself.

Chapter End Notes

I concede that the cliffhanger was a little mean, so here’s the update early. Thanks to all you lovely commenters!

I hope you enjoyed the conversation between Darcy and Erik. That was one of the most fun pieces of dialogue I’ve written this whole fic. (In case anyone hasn’t noticed, I think Darcy Lewis is epic and underrated in the MCU.)
Chapter 37

Avengers Tower, New York, United States

May 2011

“Jane!”

Jane snapped out of her thoughts and looked up. “What?”

Darcy was standing by the door to the lab. Because Jane knew her friend, she was able to detect uncharacteristic hesitation in Darcy’s posture. Or discomfort. Or both.

“How’s the duct tape?” Darcy asked, stepping farther into the room.

Jane hit the HRTEM with the side of her fist. “Holding. Barely. I had to start this one over. The readings—”

“I won’t understand any more than that,” Darcy interrupted.

Jane sighed. “Okay. Oh. How was your date last week?”

Darcy waved a hand. “A disaster. He smacked his food and thought I was an idiot. I can’t seem to find any decent guys.”

“That’s because you’re brilliant,” Jane said.

Darcy smiled, but she definitely looked uncomfortable. Upset even?

That caught Jane’s attention. Even when Darcy was upset, which was rare, she hid it better than anyone Jane had ever met. “What’s wrong? Did the meeting go badly?” Jane added.

“No… well, not exactly.” Darcy took a deep breath. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Jane examined her friend closely. “Okay…”

“You remember how Fury and Thor told us all that Loki killed Coulson?”

Jane closed her eyes. “Yes.” She missed Coulson. Wished he was still here. He was so even-keeled, easy to work with, and his humor had lightened several bad days for her. She couldn’t help thinking that he would’ve been able to check Thor-

“They lied. Thor killed Coulson.”

“Excuse me?”

Darcy nodded, face grim. “I saw it. You never asked me where I was on the helicarrier during the fight. I’d gone down to watch Loki—to see if I could pick up on anything the interrogators couldn’t. We were speaking—that conversation was weird as fuck—when the first explosion hit. I hid. Thor showed up just as Loki was leaving the cage. They were fighting and Coulson tried to interfere.”

Jane shook her head. “No.”

“Yes,” Darcy said firmly. “I’m sorry, Jane, but you know Thor has a temper. I saw the whole thing.”
“Why didn’t you tell me?” Jane said. She didn’t know what she was feeling. She wasn’t good with feelings.

Darcy wrapped her arms around herself. She looked shrunken, smaller than normal, as if she were collapsing in on herself. “Because… we were in the middle of a battle. I was going to. But then Pepper drugged us, and when we woke up everything had gone to shit, and then I wanted to give Fury a chance to tell us himself.”

“Fury knows?” Jane hated this helplessness but she couldn’t seem to do anything other than parrot Darcy’s words.

“I’m like ninety-seven percent sure. Coulson talked to Fury before he died. I’m gonna lay the odds on Coulson having told Fury who killed him and why.”

Jane closed her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Darcy said quietly.

“Do you regret any of the secrecy?” Jane asked.

Darcy considered. “No. But I’m sorry that it hurt you. That was never my intent.”

Jane laughed. It sounded false. “There’s the Darcy I know.”

“Are we… are we okay?” Darcy asked, watching Jane closely.

Tears pricked Jane’s eyes, fresh grief hitting her like a punch to the solar plexus, but she nodded. “You’re kind of my only friend.”

“I think we have more now,” Darcy said, pointing upstairs.

“Is Thor coming back?” Jane asked quietly. “Have you heard anything?”

Darcy shook her head. “Good.” Jane almost unconsciously curled her left hand into a fist. “Because if he does… I’m going to make his life unpleasant.”

Darcy smirked. It was a shade weaker than normal. “I have been such a bad influence on you. It’s awesome.”

Jane wiped her eyes. “Is this where we hug?”

“I’m not any more up on hugging protocols than you are,” Darcy joked.

Jane impulsively reached out and embraced her friend. It was awkward and clumsy but it worked, somehow, and she buried her face in Darcy’s shoulder.

“I’ll help you make his life miserable.”

They jerked apart. Darcy managed to look infuriatingly collected within half a second and turned to glare at Tony. “Your timing could not be worse.”

“Sorry, did I ruin your moment? Because if so, I’m not leaving.” Tony grinned at them and sauntered farther into the lab. It didn’t quite look like his normal smile to Jane.
“We will all make his life miserable,” Darcy said. “But strategically. Let’s not start any wars with Asgard, okay, Tony?”

Tony leaned against a table. “I make no promises.”

“No wars with Asgard,” Darcy insisted.

Tony threw up his hands. “Fine, fine…”

The HRTEM beeped.

“Okay, out,” Jane said. “You’re both distracting. Go argue somewhere else.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Tony said sarcastically. “But if Thor ever comes back, I’m on your side.”

“We are,” Darcy clarified, and dragged Tony out of the room.

As soon as they were gone, Jane leaned her forehead against the cool metal of the HRTEM.

Thor. Thor killed Coulson. Thor, who she dated, who she’d thought she loved —

This was the final proof. Romantic love was useless, blind and foolish. Jane pulled her laptop towards herself and hooked it up to the HRTEM to begin the data transfer.

She would never love blindly again.
Chapter 38

Stark Tower
May 2011

Tony paced the lab, waiting. “Dummy, come on, this isn’t rocket science.”

Steve raised an eyebrow. “Well…”

“Shut up,” Tony said.

Steve shut up.

The tension hadn’t bled out of Tony’s frame once since the battle. Even when Steve or Jane occasionally found him passed out in his lab, he was rigid and nervous in his sleep, often twitching and muttering.

Now, Tony was jerkier and more impatient than Steve remembered him being on the helicarrier, in the short time they’d known each other before the battle. He was working on improving Steve’s suit in some way. Or possibly it was the quiver project for Clint. Steve wasn’t sure. He had noticed that Tony usually had at least five ideas in various stages of production at any given time, and somehow he managed to finish all of them eventually.

“There we go,” Tony said, and snatched something from one of the robot assistants constantly hovering around him. It was small and had several lights on it in different shades of green. Steve watched Tony walk briskly over to his holotable-

Tony’s phone rang.

He whipped it out of his pocket and fumbled with the screen. Steve’s heart went out to the man for the desperate hope showing clearly on his normally-controlled face.

He wondered if Bruce had made any headway on the PTSD thing. Steve had taken Darcy’s advice and roped Bruce into the effort, but so far Tony had brushed off Bruce’s initial efforts.

Tony raised the phone to his ear. “Stark,” he said.

There was a pause.

His face whitened. The device fell out of his hand and shattered on the floor.

“Tony,” Steve began, and then Tony ran from the room.

The Avengers were sprawled around the hospital waiting room in various disguises.

Predictably, Clint and Maria blended in perfectly, Clint with a coffee and a blind man’s sunglasses and cane, Maria with an old-fashioned dress that Steve found somewhat endearing, glasses, and a magazine. Somehow they also managed to alter their posture and bearing and became so different Steve might not have recognized them in a casual environmental scan.

Darcy managed it quite well, becoming quite unassuming between her demeanor and a baggy hoodie
and loose hairstyle that obscured her eye-catching looks. She sat back and tapped away on her StarkPhone, the picture of a bored young woman.

Bruce and, Steve suspected, himself hadn’t been so successful. Bruce looked uncomfortable, possibly because he’d once been a doctor, and he was definitely attracting some odd looks. Luckily, it was mainly footage of the Hulk and not Bruce that dominated the newsfeeds, so people didn’t really recognize him. Steve, on the other hand, knew that his tall, muscular frame and his face were widely known. He’d put on a large leather jacket and a baseball cap and kept his eyes down, but he could tell that people were staring. One of the “perks” of being an enhanced person.

Tony was the most obvious of them all.

He’d made no attempt to disguise himself; his eyes were bloodshot and his face pale and hard as granite. Steve hadn’t seen him blink in several minutes. Tony simply sat with his hands gripping each other tightly enough to turn his knuckles white and stared blankly at the linoleum floor. He’d tried to get into the back of the hospital, where Pepper had apparently had some kind of seizure and been rushed into surgery; it had taken Steve, Maria, and two nurses to hold him back until he quit fighting and sat down. Now Steve, Maria, and Clint were all keeping a close watch on him.

The door to the visitor’s lounge opened.

They all turned their attention that way, some more subtly than others. Steve did an automatic scan of the doctor in the doorway - six foot even, fit but not a fighter, African American - and turned his attention back to his team.

Tony was on his feet, staring at the doctor.

“Mr. Stark?” the doctor said. “I’m Dr. Paine.”

“Pepper?” Tony said hoarsely.

Paine’s lips thinned. “We did all we could, but the cerebral trauma was… too severe.” He took a breath. “She’s… she’s gone. I’m so sorry.”

He was, Steve could tell. He decided that must be the worst part of this profession. It wasn’t so different from Steve’s occupation, really: no matter how many people you saved, it was always the few you couldn’t that haunted your dreams. The people who died because you weren’t fast enough, strong enough, skilled enough to keep them alive.

Tony was trembling.

“Thank you,” Steve said to Paine, stepping over to Tony. “Is there anything else…”

“Not at the moment,” Paine said.

Ask about her body, Steve mouthed to Maria. She nodded briskly, and Steve guided Tony out of the lounge, eyeing him sideways. Tony showed no sign of resistance or awareness, moving robotically. The tap of Clint’s cane followed them down the hallway until Steve found a staff exit and left the building.

He heard Darcy murmuring into her phone, asking JARVIS to send their cars down around to this corner of the building - for security, Tony had installed a highly advanced autonomous system in all their vehicles and upgraded each car’s internal computers. Steve had been grateful, as he could use the voice control for help while he figured out how to drive cars that were seventy-five years more advanced than he was used to.
“Tony,” Steve said gently. “Tony, can you get back to the tower?”

That seemed to snap him out of it. Tony turned and raised an eyebrow at Steve. “Tower? Why would I go there?”

There was a fierce and uncompromising energy glittering in Tony’s eyes, born of grief and pressure and stress and worry and collapsing hope. He was caving in and retreating inside his shell for protection, burying all of it beneath the playboy facade. For the first time, Steve realized that false image was as much to protect Tony from himself as it was to shield him from others.

“No, we’re going back to the tower,” Darcy said firmly, grabbing Tony’s other arm.

He jerked away and glared at them both. “You don’t give me orders,” he hissed, and as his orange Audi pulled up to the curb, Tony jumped inside and saluted them both.

“JARVIS, stop him,” Darcy said.

“JARVIS, don’t let them follow me,” Tony countered, and floored it.

Steve bolted after the orange sports car, but its modern engine accelerated faster than he could, even in the parking lot.

Darcy cursed and jumped in her vehicle. Bruce hauled open the passenger door of Steve’s car - they’d come together - and Clint and Maria ran for their motorcycles.

Steve slid into the driver’s seat and gunned the gas pedal after Tony, but when he tried to turn after the scientist, the wheel locked and the car stopped. “I’m sorry, but I cannot allow you to follow Mr. Stark,” JARVIS said. “He has commanded that I return you all to Avengers Tower. I am sorry for the inconvenience.”

“Damn these cars,” Steve hissed.

Bruce cast a worried look at Steve. “He’s not going to… hurt himself, do you think?”

Steve bit back his shock. Self-harm and suicide had been taboo subjects, shameful actions, back in the forties. He remembered what a shock it had been that such things were so much more freely acknowledged in modern times, although he admitted it was good that people were aware of such issues and better at helping people recover. “I… don’t know,” he said slowly.

“If Mr. Stark engages in behaviors that seem designed to inflict physical harm or deliberately lead to his death, I will notify the Avengers and the police and do everything in my power to stop him. Will that suffice?”

“It’ll have to,” Steve muttered. “Why I ever let him give me a car…”

Bruce sighed and tipped his head back.

The city lights washed over the silent interior of Steve’s little unassuming car. Darcy’s car and the two motorcycles trailed behind. It reminded Steve forcefully of his mother’s funeral and the train of vehicles following the hearse.

He wished he’d been able to know Pepper. They hadn’t met before the battle, but from what everyone said about her, from what Tony said about her… She must have been a remarkable woman indeed, to command the fidelity of Tony Stark, to run Stark Industries as she did. As strong as Peggy, in her own way.
Steve shoved aside his grief. He needed to go see Peggy soon.

But not yet. Not yet. Not while he was still adjusting. And not while Tony needed him here.

Clint found him in the parking garage after three hours with a silent nod and something wrapped in a plastic bag labeled SubWay. Steve examined the logo briefly, committing it to memory, and discovered that a footlong sandwich loaded down with toppings and condiments.

His stomach growled.

Clint smiled. “Thought you’d be hungry.”

Steve nodded. He didn’t think he could talk with his mouth this full.

Clint passed over a water bottle and sat down next to Steve on the cold bench by the private elevator to the Avengers’ floors. “When do you think he’ll be back?”

“Soon, I hope,” Steve said. It came out as sss, I (gurgle). He swallowed hard and repeated himself, adding, “JARVIS still not saying anything?”

Clint shook his head. “Apparently Tony ordered JARVIS keep our vehicles out of service and not tell us where he is. Darcy said something about searching social media for him, but she hasn’t had any luck, which is admittedly odd. She’s in a terrible mood. So’s Maria. Bruce went to bed and I still don’t know where Tasha—” He broke off, looking frustrated.

“Natasha’s fine,” Steve said. “I miss her too, but - you know what she’s capable of. She can look after herself.”

“Tasha’s not who I’m worried about,” Clint said, but didn’t elaborate.

“You gonna wait with me?” Steve asked after several minutes of silence.

Clint shrugged. “I’m not sure how I ended up den mother for a bunch of superheroes, but since Darcy and I are the only people who remember to feed ourselves regularly, looks like that’s my job. So yeah.”

“Well, thanks for the sandwich,” Steve said. “It definitely doesn’t taste like it has Tony’s ego on it.”

Clint laughed, but the brief levity faded quickly, and they lapsed back into silence.

For two and a half more hours.

At last, the rumble of the private parking level door brought Steve and Clint to their feet. Steve winced and stretched stiff, cold muscles and caught Clint doing the same.

The orange Audi purred into view and parked perfectly in Tony’s usual spot.

Clint and Steve exchanged a glance when Tony didn’t immediately get out and started walking toward the car.

They were almost there when the driver door opened with a hiss and Tony staggered out. He had changed out of his T-shirt and khakis at some point, into a designer suit and dress shoes. The suit and shoes were both ruined. He stank of alcohol to Steve’s enhanced nose and was clearly extremely drunk. Something that looked suspiciously like olives was mashed in his damp hair.
Clint’s eyes widened. “Man, it’s a miracle you didn’t crash.”

“I was responsible for operating Mr. Stark’s vehicle,” JARVIS said from the car’s speakers. “I have a protocol instructing me to lock manual vehicular controls when Mr. Stark is in a state of intoxication.”

“That’s smart,” Clint muttered, and glared at Tony. “What have you been doing?”

“Living the life,” Tony slurred, and almost fell over.

Steve and Clint caught him at the same time. Steve wrinkled his nose at the stench of body odor and alcohol that was coming off Tony in waves. It reminded him of the hours he’d spent trying to get drunk after Bucky’s death, and he fought hard to keep a mixture of jealousy at bay. Tony still had this escape. Some people’s only way out was a punching bag.

Although, judging from Tony’s admittedly impressive fitness level, it seemed he used the punching bag coping method somewhat regularly himself.

“Come on,” Clint grunted. Tony managed to keep himself upright long enough for Clint and Steve to each sling one of his arms over their shoulders and awkwardly led him toward the elevator in a strange and unbalanced clot.

“JARVIS, does he have a breathalyzer anywhere?” Clint asked.

“Clint,” Steve said. “That’s not necessary.”

Clint shrugged. “It’d be interesting. I haven’t seen anyone this drunk since Tasha slipped extra alcohol in the Hungarian ambassador’s drinks all night in Austria five years ago.”

“Tell me that story later,” Tony mumbled. “Sounds funny.”

“Oh-kay, yeah, let’s get him to bed,” Clint said.

Tony raised one hand and poked Steve hard in the back of the head. “What are you doing here?”

“Taking care of your sorry drunk ass,” Steve snapped, and took a breath. You would’ve gotten just this drunk after… after Bucky… if you could’ve. It was less than two years ago by his mental clock that he had lost his best friend. Sixty-seven years separated Bucky from today, but Steve couldn’t forget.

Tony squinted sideways at Steve as they got on the elevator. “I… hated you,” he said. “Always… the one Dad liked.”

“Agent Barton, there is a breathalyzer located in Ms. Potts’ and Mr. Stark’s bedroom. Would you care for me to direct you to it?”

Is that worry in JARVIS’ voice?

“Not ssssleeping in there,” Tony mumbled, pawing at Clint. “N-no…”

“Fine, you can sleep on the couch,” Steve sighed.

The elevators dinged open onto the level above the penthouse - Tony’s private floor. Steve, Clint, Maria, and Bruce had all been given a suite on the floor above, but Tony kept this floor to himself and Pepper.
Just himself now.

Darcy was waiting on the couch.

Tony squinted her direction as Steve and Clint helped him out of the elevator.

“Thought this might happen,” she said. “Do you guys think I’m psychic?”

“You being psychic would be the least weird part of the last month,” Clint said.

Darcy jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “Bedroom’s that way.”

“He wants the sofa,” Steve said.

Darcy raised an eyebrow. “All righty then.

Steve’s lips tightened and he and Clint dumped Tony onto the nearest sofa. The scientist squinted up at them and tried to roll over, but he just collapsed back down with a moan.

“I’ll find some water,” Clint said.

“Aspirin, too,” Darcy said. “Check the fridge.”

“I’ll find the breathalyzer,” Steve said, and they split up. Clint headed in the direction of the kitchen, and Steve heard him begin to rummage around as he pushed open the door to the bedroom. Darcy was shifting things around in the living area, probably pillows and blankets.

Steve hesitated on the threshold. It was another difference between his childhood and modern behavioral patterns: a couple’s bedroom, unless they were your parents, was more or less off-limits, depending on how close you were to one or both members of the couple. Steve’s enhanced senses picked up a faint aroma that was a distinct mix of Tony and something else, slightly more feminine. It was dark, private, and not nearly as ostentatious as Steve might’ve expected. But then again, neither was the rest of Tony’s floor.

Unable to shake the feeling that he was intruding somewhere he shouldn’t, Steve pulled the StarkPhone out of his pocket. “JARVIS, where’s the breathalyzer?”

“It is located in the top drawer on your left side of the bed,” JARVIS responded.

This side of the bed was flat, the smell fainter. Pepper’s, probably. Steve guessed she kept the breathalyzer nearby to check on Tony when he was like this.

The small black device rested neatly next to a 9mm Glock, a magazine loaded with hollow points, a flashlight, and a heavy book with a title in Spanish. Steve squinted at it - he hadn’t ever really focused on learning Spanish, since it was mostly German, Russian, and French that he had to deal with.

“She was reading that,” Tony said hoarsely.

Steve turned. Tony was standing in the doorway, grief and exhaustion hammered into every line of his body.

“For... the company,” Tony added. “It’ssss a famous... business...” He trailed off. Steve noticed that his gaze had landed on the one photograph in the room, a glossy eight-by-twelve of Pepper and Tony by an airplane with the words Stark Industries on it. Pepper was looking at the plane, focused and determined but with a little smile playing about her lips. Tony in the picture was looking at
Pepper with as much intensity as Steve had ever seen on his face. It was one of those candid moments that always left outsiders feeling like they should step away. Steve’s discomfort increased.

“Come on,” he said, and led Tony out of the doorway, closing the room firmly behind them. Tony offered no resistance as Steve dragged him back to the sofa.

He examined the breathalyzer in his hand. There was a nozzle - presumably that went in the person’s mouth? And several rubber buttons, and a light-up screen. Steve still didn’t know how they made the colors so bright - Bruce had called it an LCD display.

“What does LCD stand for?” he asked Tony.

“Liquid crystal display,” Tony said.

Steve pushed the button with a “power” symbol on it and the screen flickered to life.

“Okay,” he muttered, and stuck the nozzle in between Tony’s lips. “Breathe.”

Tony obligingly took a few deep breaths.

Nothing happened.

Clint walked out of the kitchen with a tall glass of water and something else in his hand. “Bastard hid the aspirin way in the back of the fridge,” he said.

Darcy popped out of the bathroom with a wet towel.

Steve looked up. “How do you, ah…?” He held up the breathalyzer.

“I got it,” Darcy said, set down the towel, and glanced at the device. “You have to press ‘start’ first, Cappie.” She pointed to a little button on the side.

Steve nodded and watched Darcy repeat the process with expert skill, except she pressed the ‘start’ button as soon as the nozzle was in Tony’s mouth.

There was a beep about forty-five seconds later, and Darcy glanced at the screen, then angled it to face them. Clint’s eyebrows shot up. “Point twenty-one? Man, what in the hell were you drinking?”

Steve cast his eyes upward. “Tony-”

“Mmm fine,” Tony said. “Lemme sleep.”

“Hold up, cowboy,” Darcy said, and stuffed two little red pills into Tony’s mouth. She followed them with the water so quickly that Tony had no choice but to swallow and held it at his lips, forcing him to continue swallowing. The towel was ready in her left hand when Tony sputtered and a bit of water dripped down his cheek.

Darcy plunked the mostly-empty glass on the table and wiped at Tony’s face, neck, and hair. She was brisk, but not ungentle.

Steve’s eyebrows furrowed. There was… an element of practice here - of well-established routine to Darcy’s movement pattern. When had she learned to do this so easily?

A glance at Clint told Steve that he was thinking the same thing.

Darcy blew hair out of her face and cast Tony a look that was part irritated, part fond. His eyes were
“Get his jacket and shoes off,” she told Steve and Clint. “I’m going to find more blankets. There’s like two pillows out here and that one blanket looks like a shawl. Why people choose aesthetics over function I do not understand…”

She wandered off in the direction of the bathroom.

Steve and Clint began wrestling Tony’s suit jacket, belt, and shoes off. Clint handled the belt and shoes with dexterity while Steve struggled with the jacket.

At last, he got the sweat-stained, damp garment off, and put it on the floor by the shoes and belt.

Tony was sound asleep on the couch, mouth open and eyebrows tight.

“What do you know about Darcy’s past?” Steve asked in a low voice.

Clint glanced toward the bathroom. “Not much,” he admitted quietly. “She got into Boston University on a full ride and majored in political science. Picked up that internship with Jane the summer after her last year of college to finish off her science credits, and… you’ve probably heard the rest.”

Steve nodded.

“She seems pretty familiar with people drunk out of their minds,” Clint added. “Didn’t bat an eye at the breathalyzer reading.

“I noticed,” Steve said grimly.

“My dad was an alcoholic.”

Both men whipped around guiltily and found Darcy standing behind them. Her face was fierce and uncompromising. She held a stack of blankets and pillows in her arms.

_How did she manage to sneak up on us?_

“I was the oldest of three kids. No mom in the house. I’m pretty sure at least one of us was only a half sibling. Lizzie. I ended up the default washer-of-drunk-faces.”

Steve didn’t know what to say.

“I don’t want your pity,” Darcy said sharply, glaring at both of them.

Clint raised his hands. “Wasn’t going to offer any.”

Darcy nodded once and started tucking the blankets in neatly around Tony.

Clint and Steve waited awkwardly until she was finished and then walked with her toward the elevators.

“Darcy,” Clint said quietly. “You know you can… talk to us. If you want to. Honesty helps.”

Darcy glanced at him dismissively. “Tell that to the mirror.”

Clint flinched.
Steve watched them closely. Was Clint hiding something that Darcy had picked up on? She was intuitive, good at reading people and social maneuvering; she’d proved that already.

When they arrived on the Avengers’ residential floor, Darcy called “‘Nighty night,’” over her shoulder and vanished into her room almost immediately.

Steve lingered by his door until Clint had shut himself away as well before he at last went inside.

The suite provided by Tony was larger than anywhere Steve had ever stayed, even as Captain America, when he was hosted by some of the most posh hotels in the country. He had a bedroom with a walk-in closet, a living room, a full bathroom off his bedroom and another smaller one off the living room, a conference-slash-dining-room, a full kitchen even though there was one in the penthouse where they often ate together, another room that Steve thought was supposed to be an office or study of some kind, and an exercise room. It was ridiculous, but kind of nice, to have this much space to himself.

Although the bed was way too soft.

Steve decided there wasn’t a point in trying to sleep - even if he could, it would be restless and leave him just as tired as if he hadn’t slept at all. He grabbed the wraps for his knuckles and walked into the small gymnasium, where a hundred-fifty pound punching bag waited patiently.

Steve took a deep breath, stilled his mind, and started hitting.
Chapter 39

SHIELD Headquarters, Washington, D.C., United States

May 2011

Natasha studied the bare bones of the Triskelion. Only its skeleton was in place, but inside a year, if Fury had his way, the whole structure would be finished and SHIELD would begin to move in. It would be a nightmare for her, frankly; she hated towers. It was too easy to get pinned in the top with no way down but falling.

She’d have to stash squirrel suits around the roof and the top half of the building, then. Possibly air cushions in the elevator shafts that would inflate on cue? There’d have to be some kind of trigger mechanism inside each of the shaft doors, or possibly just a proximity chip that she implanted in her ankle or something…

Natasha set aside those ideas for safety-proofing the Triskelion and focused on her report. She never wrote anything down if she could help it, preferring to commit all her missions to memory and give verbal rundowns to Fury.

The helicopter swooped in over the old SHIELD headquarters, a stumpy building across the water from the Triskelion that was a lot bigger under the earth than it was above. It always reminded Natasha of a hand making a hitchhiker’s thumb, the fist buried and only the thumb poking above the earth.

When the helicopter touched down, she hopped out and strode for the rooftop watch, a square structure of bulletproof one-way glass with steel doors set into two sides. A SHIELD guard hauled open the door for her. He couldn’t have known who she was, but there was nervousness in his eyes anyway. Good. Natasha smirked faintly and nodded at him, conscious of the box under her arm.

She bypassed the elevator bank inside the watch and hopped into the stairwell. Natasha took three steps down and stopped. The stairwell was empty. She had forty floors to descend.

What the hell.

Natasha grinned and flexed her shoulders. She pulled a grappling unit off her belt and aimed it carefully at the ceiling of the stairwell. The tiny computer built into the handle scanned the ceiling and carefully chose a target.

With a pop, the hook shot from the disk in her hand and slammed into the ceiling. It punctured through the drywall into a steel support girder and expanded, securing its grip.

Natasha adjusted her grip. The grappling unit consisted of a disc of slender high-strength cable on a reel. There was a handle on one edge and a friction brake near her thumb.

She readjusted her grip on the cardboard box and jumped over the railing.

Natasha resisted the urge to laugh as she free-fell through the heart of the stairwell, whipping past one landing after another.

Twenty-five—thirty—now.

She jammed her thumb onto the friction brake. Heat immediately began to seep through the handle
into her palm, but she held on and came to a halt exactly at floor forty-one—the floors were numbered down from the top in this building.

The door opened.

Fury no more than raised his eyebrows at the sight of Natasha dangling in the center of the stairwell. “Care to join me?” he asked sarcastically.

Natasha kicked out and pressed the button that released her grappling cable at the same time, launching in a graceful arc onto the landing. She held the reel button and the cable whirred as the motor fought to suck in all the cable as it fell.

She grinned at Fury.

He rolled his eye. “Come on, I have a new mission for you.”

No.

Natasha hid her reaction and followed him, good mood officially ruined. She was supposed to be taking this week to herself. She had told Fury that before this mission that she was returning from. She had to be in Chita in two days.

She would have to talk him out of this, or this situation was going to go south in a dramatic way.

They were silent until Fury arrived at an office Natasha didn’t recognize. It wasn’t Fury’s normal corner office, but a small closet-like, windowless room with a flimsy desk and two cold metal chairs.

Natasha raised an eyebrow. “New digs?”

Fury sat down and gestured for her to do the same. “My office has been… compromised.”


Fury waved her shock away. “Doesn’t matter. We just can’t use it right now.”

Natasha decided to let it slide for now. “Operation report?”

“Not now,” Fury said. “That operation’s taken a backseat.”

“I was undercover for three weeks,” Natasha protested. “Was that wasted time?”

“It was top priority when I assigned it to you. Something bigger came up.”

Natasha flexed her fists beneath the table. “Sir, I had requested this week off.”

“Agent Romanoff,” Fury snapped, “are you questioning my authority?”

There were several responses that Natasha could give. In a heartbeat, she made a choice. She was close, she was slipping off her chains and she was days away from the closet lead she’d had in decades.

So she looked Nick Fury in the eye and said, “Yes.”

His lips tightened. “Agent Romanoff, I know you are not as ideologically bound to this organization as some, but you made a decision to join us rather than be hunted, and I should warn you that if you regress, you will jump straight to the top of my list.”
Like I wasn’t at the top of his watch list already. “Yes, sir.” She’d pushed him as far as she could. If Fury realized she was about to break with SHIELD, she’d have a hard time leaving this building alive.

So Natasha would have to play along, get out of here alive, and then dump the SHIELD tails.

“Apologies,” she continued. “I - there was a human trafficking ring in Brazil—remember the operation a year ago? Coulson assigned it. I went undercover as one of their… wares… for a month. I am going to go back there and tear that place to the ground. I had hoped to do so this week. Their business swells every spring.”

Fury rubbed his forehead. “Really? You’re turning into a philanthropist now?”

“I have never been actively cruel,” Natasha said stiffly.

“But you’re not known for kindness, either.”

“I do not have to defend my morality or lack thereof to you,” Natasha said, drawing herself up and fixing him with her coldest glare. “You know full well there are SHIELD agents who use this job to satisfy sick and violent inclinations. Your holier-than-thou act is dripping hypocrisy.”

Fury blinked. “Hypocrisy?”

“Never mind,” Natasha muttered. “What’s the new operation?”

Fury handed her a file. “Standard infiltration op, nonstandard target. Everything’s in there.”

Natasha flipped open the file and started scanning the pages within. She kept her face carefully blank, but - just like the last operation - this felt flimsy. Silly. Beneath her talents. She could think of six agents who were easily capable of handling this; she’d been involved in the training of each one, and they were all highly skilled.

Fury was trying to keep her busy.

Natasha snapped the folder shut. “Got it. Anything else?”

“A coffee would be nice,” Fury muttered.

Natasha grinned. “That’s what you have Balik for.”

Fury nodded at her package. “What’s in the box?”

Natasha picked it up and plunked the box on the table. “A hat, a framed embroidered quote, a pair of pants, a stack of paper, a book, a purse, and a rubber pigeon.”

“What?”

She smirked at Fury’s expression. “For Rogers, Stark, Banner, Foster, Lewis, and Barton, respectively.” Natasha just wished she could be there to see their faces when they opened the box. Steve and Tony were going to laugh. Bruce probably would too. Jane was going to be shocked. Lewis and Maria had been harder, but in the end Natasha was sure she’d chosen well. You could find just about anything in Hong Kong, where her last operation had been, if you tried.

“And you want me to deliver the box?” Fury asked.

“Or just hang onto it. Clint’s been shuttling between here and the tower, I believe.”
Fury shook his head. “How you keep your finger on my pulse when you’re halfway around the world is a little bit creepy.”

“Like you’re not just as bad,” Natasha said. “If that’s all, I’ll be going now. I need to restock on ammo before I take off.” She tapped the folder.

“Break a leg,” Fury said.

Natasha dipped her head, left the closet, and made her way back towards the stairwell.

As soon as she was inside the concrete column, she stepped up three stairs until she was in the tiny blind spot of the stairwell. The second the cameras no longer had eyes on her, she reached into her belt and pulled out a jammer. With a press of the button, it began to emit a signal that would scramble any cameras and erase her from digital sight.

Natasha jogged down eleven levels and stepped out into the Level 51 hall.

Fortunately, it was empty. She slipped into the first office she saw, locked the door behind herself, and used her grappling line to hang next to a ceiling vent for as long as it took her to pull the vent cover away. Natasha reached up inside with a diamond-edged handheld cutter from her boot and sawed away at the aluminum until the air vent had a large chunk taken out of the side.

She swung her feet up and shimmed feet first up into the vent—it was barely large enough—disengaged the grappler, and wound it in. The vent cover was pulled back into place the second she cable snapped back into place. Natasha stowed the grappler and the diamond cutter before she shoved the piece of aluminum out of the way and made her way into the ceiling crawlspace.

It was hot, dark, dusty, and cramped. Natasha had barely a foot of vertical space to work with. She shredded a bit of cloth from her undershirt and tied it around her nose and mouth, then placed a pair of sunglasses outfitted with night vision over her eyes. The world reappeared in shades of green.

It was a long way from the vent to Nick Fury’s office.

Natasha was sweaty and disgusting by the time she arrived, absolutely covered in dust and dead insects. She probably looked a horror. Natasha had to grin behind her improvised mask. She would scare the living shit out of Clint if she could drop in front of him right now. Too bad he was still at Avengers Tower.

Natasha wished she didn’t have to leave him, but her window was narrow and she didn’t dare try to contact him. The risk that Fury would intercept it was too high, and she would not endanger her path to her Soldier. It’d be nice to have Clint as backup, but she was the Black Widow. She worked best alone.

Natasha switched the goggles off when the vent for the corner office under Fury’s came into view. Fury’s office was on the third underground level, so “corner office” didn’t really mean much, but most of the aboveground levels were clerical.

She cut her way into the vent and craned it up, unable to turn onto her back in the small space.

Perfect. There was a straight line through the ventilation system up through a small rectangular grate in the floor of Fury’s office.

Natasha had a small kit of tools that she had cleverly packed like Tetris into several small pouches on her suit. They were attached to the belt slung around her hips and she had mastered the art of concealing all of it under a plain black mid-thigh-length jacket and boots. With those two pieces of
attire, she transformed herself from a special operative to a city-chic young woman. Summer months were harder, but in May, she still had a bit of leeway, and her usual baseline set of supplies was where she always kept it. Including the periscope.

The little device wasn’t a real periscope; it was mostly just a camera and directional microphone on a flexible rod. Natasha could view and listen in real time through the sunglasses, which she turned back on as soon as the camera came online. A chip in the bottom of the rod easily held the feed for evidence. Natasha hesitated, then switched it to ‘record’.

The pinhole camera poked up above the grate.

The image on her glasses was poor, and the audio feed that played from the microphones in the glasses’ arms was scratchy, but Natasha could tell easily that the office was absolutely wrecked, and also empty.

Interesting.

She examined the grate, debating whether she could fit through it. Most floor grates were far too small for a human body, but underground facilities like this were different; ventilation systems had to be much larger in order to keep the air tolerably fresh.

She was slender. It should work.

Natasha waited another minute to make sure the office really was empty before she tucked the glasses and the periscope back into her belt. She drew out a tiny can of lubricant and aimed it up into the vent. The straw for the can’s contents nestled nicely under the bottom edge of the grate. Natasha carefully sprayed a small amount of the WD-40 around the grate’s edges and then cut her way farther into the pipe until she could reach up with both arms and silently lift the grate free.

She carefully slid it to the side of the vent and wriggled her way up and out of the air piping.

Natasha paused with just her eyes above the vent, peering around carefully. The office looked even worse than it had through the pinhole camera. There were papers strewn everywhere - that in itself was odd, since Fury hated writing things down and avoided it if at all possible.

She glanced over the papers. Plans and designs for - strange technology. Things she didn’t recognize. Natasha pulled out her black phone and began photographing the papers without disturbing any; Stark or someone could analyze them later.

Of course, she’d have to figure out an anonymous way to get them to him. After what she was about to do, it was doubtful that Natasha would be welcome in Avengers Tower anymore.

Something caught her eye. Strangely-colored something in a jar on the desk, the only intact section of the office. Natasha crept closer. It was-

Footsteps outside the door.

She was back down the vent feetfirst in a flash, sliding the grate back into place a half second before the door opened.

“-can’t understand your reticence, Doctor,” Fury’s voice said.

“Good gracious, you weren’t joking about the mess.”

Fury chuckled. “No, I was not.”
“My reticence remains because I am concerned about the origin of the materials of which you speak.”

“The information is all here,” Fury said, and Natasha heard him rustling about on the floor.

“What happened exactly?”

Fury’s rustling paused, then resumed. “A source made something of a mess in here.”

_No kidding_. Natasha was intensely curious. This secret seemed to be of a larger magnitude than Fury’s usual clandestine activities. The tissue in the jar had been _blue_.

“How did you get this?”

The unfamiliar voice was trembling with something. Shock, perhaps, or amazement. Natasha hoped the audio being recorded by the pinhole camera would be good enough for voice recognition later; she couldn’t get video. It was too risky that Fury would notice the camera.

“I’ll show you later. For now-” Natasha heard Fury cross the floor to the door. “Agent Balik, show the good doctor to the laboratory.”

“Yes, sir,” Balik said, and the door closed. Fury was alone in his office.

Moving unbearably slowly to minimize her noise, Natasha folded herself bit by bit out of the vent. She was on her back, which was unfortunate, but she’d been in such a hurry to get out of sight that she hadn’t had a chance to turn over how she wanted.

She slipped her sunglasses back on, set them to night vision, and set off, inching her way through the crawl space on her back. It was tiring and tedious work, but it didn’t require much concentration, leaving her to her spinning thoughts.

What was that tissue sample? Why did Fury have it? Where had he gotten it? Was the ‘source’ who’d made a mess of his office the person he’d gotten the tissue from? Could it be Chitauri tissue? No, that wouldn’t be so groundbreaking - there’d been plenty of dead Chitauri for Fury to collect and study. This had to be something else.

She would have to find a way to get the pictures, audio, and video from today to Stark. Hopefully he could make something of it. But not now. It would jeopardize her mission to retrieve her Soldier, and Natasha would not allow anything else to come between her and Zima again.

When at last she crawled out of the vents, Natasha was a disaster. Her hair was covered in dust, along with every inch of her body.

She poked the periscope out into the corridor and watched until it emptied, then slipped down four doors to the cleaning closet by the elevators. Natasha stepped inside the closet, pulled the door shut, and reached in the dark for a camouflaged thumbprint panel near the ceiling. It scanned her thumb, beeped twice, and the wall slid aside, revealing a small compartment that concealed cash, a handgun, four passports, and a bundle of fabric. Natasha had similar caches all throughout HQ and she’d set up three in Avengers Tower just in case.

She pulled a rag out of the cleaning supplies and scrubbed at her face, neck, and hands. Her hair she tucked up in a green hat and she pulled the long black jacket on over her tactical suit, neatly hiding the evidence of her climb through the ceiling. It would somewhat odd to wear a hat and a long coat in May, but less strange than being covered in dust and cobwebs.
Natasha carefully cleaned her boots and the visible calves of her tac suit until there was nothing but faint traces of the dust and grime in the seams.

She stepped out of the closet and took the staircase the entire way to the top floor.

Barely out of breath, Natasha strode to the helicopter that waited for her and climbed aboard. “Dulles Airport,” she told the pilot, and he nodded and fired up the rotors.

Natasha did a quick, habitual check of the passenger compartment and settled in. There was one pilot and one passenger; the rest of the copter was empty.

When she landed, there’d doubtless be SHIELD agents waiting to tail her wherever she went and a tracker on the vehicle she’d taken there. That was all right. She would be leaving via an entirely different mode of transportation.

Natasha compulsively stroked the long scar on her arm. It was a reminder: she had covered her Soldier’s six, and taken a cut in return that went down to the bone. He repaid her by slaughtering three dozen of their enemies and coming to her, hands bloody and face worse, to apologize for his lapse. He would apologize to no one in this world but her. She had saved his life that night. He had saved hers as well.

*I’m coming, my Soldier. My Zima.*

Natasha Romanoff, born Natalia Romanova, smiled without a trace of mercy or kindness as the spires of Dulles International Airport came into view.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SHIELD Headquarters, Washington, D.C., United States

May 2011

Fury punched the wall.

He regretted it instantly. There was now blood on the paint in addition to the half-sorted disaster on the floor. His distasteful visitor had made quite a mess with her entrance and exit, though the news she brought had been worth it.

Fury pressed his barking knuckles to his lips and closes his eyes.

Fucking Romanoff. He should’ve seen this coming, but he’d been too preoccupied with the TAHITI project to pick up on the clues that were all too glaring in hindsight. Barton’s weird behavior of late, Romanoff’s reluctance to go out on her mission. No way was it to destroy a human trafficking ring in Brazil. He never should’ve fallen for such a simple ruse.

He’d still get his Brazil operatives and contacts to keep a weather eye out.

This whole Avengers thing was blowing up in his face. It was time to recall Barton and Hill. Rogers, too, if he could be convinced - technically the man wasn’t SHIELD, but Fury could certainly use a chemically and genetically modified supersoldier. Although he’d have to keep some of his less tasteful ventures hidden. Captain America was a fundamentally good person. Problematically so, at times.

But all of the Avengers had been worryingly distant to Fury when he’d visited last. He had simply stopped by to check on the scepter and personally verify their continued willingness to cooperate. The whole team had been aloof and cold. It was concerning, to say the least.

Time to start breaking up the Avengers. They’d served their purpose and were now becoming a liability.

He’d recall Hill as soon as possible and keep her close for a few years; separate Barton from the rest with lengthy field ops. Fury had several that would suit the assassin’s skill set nicely and hopefully distract him with pretty women ready for a few rounds on the mattress. Rogers—he was sure he could find something interesting for Rogers to do. If nothing else, separating him from the rest of the group would sever their growing bonds.

Then there was the science trio. Stark, Banner, and Foster. Banner could be diverted fairly easily; Fury found it difficult to believe the man was sticking around for any reason other than the scepter. He hated big cities and publicity, and Avengers Tower boasted both. With the scepter gone, Banner would take off, and take the Hulk with him. Fury would offer Foster a huge fee to travel with Selvig and study Einstein-Rosen bridges and other astronomical phenomena for SHIELD in some remote observatory. She loved her science; she’d never say no, even on condition of Darcy Lewis staying behind.

Because Lewis needed to be taken care of.
Fury made a note on the table in his own private code to arrange a little ‘accident’ for Darcy Lewis soon. There was no telling what she knew, but given that none of the Avengers had come snarling to Fury’s doorstep, she clearly hadn’t told them the truth. She remained a liability. The girl was too clever.

And then, with the Avengers scattered, Fury knew he would have his chance.

He looked around the disaster of his office and his chin lifted with conviction. It was a new and better world he was building, he knew it. There would be planet-wide safety, prosperity, and peace for the first time in human history, and it would be Nick Fury behind it.

Of course, no one would know it was him, but he didn’t need the credit. Just the power, and the knowledge that he’d fixed things, he’d healed the world—that would be enough.

Chapter End Notes

Y’all are overreacting. Loki’s not Fury's prisoner. I know I updated yesterday but I didn't want too many people leaping wildly down that path--you might get whiplash in a couple chapters (hint: our favorite extraterrestrial prankster is going to come back. Enthusiastically.)

I'm still not going to tell you who Fury's visitor was, or who he got a visit from.

But hey... TAHITI ;));;)}
Chapter 41

Avengers Tower, New York, United States

May 2011

“Tony!”

Tony rolled over and was on his feet in a second. “Wha- what’d I miss?”

He blinked sleep fugue from his eyes. Clint was standing next to the door, eyes wide. “Get up, man! We got a problem!”

Tony stumbled to the dresser and dragged a pair of pants on over his boxers. “What?”

“Some bank robbers are making a fuss down on Sixth. Got their hands on Chitauri weapons. Police are dropping like flies, their pistols aren’t doing jack shit. Suit up!”

He bolted.

“JARVIS, get me the Mark 7!” Tony said, and scrambled into a long-sleeve shirt as he ran out of the room.

“In your penthouse, sir.”

Tony hurled himself into the stairwell and down one level. He burst through the doors into the penthouse and stepped backward into the Mark 7’s cubicle. The suit enveloped his limbs almost instantly, metal armor falling into place.

By the time Tony’s faceplate locked down and the HUD flickered on, he felt himself again. The grief was held at bay, for now.

Pepper -

No.

He dragged his thoughts away from that rabbit hole and had JARVIS open a line to Clint’s StarkPhone.

“You on the jet?” Tony asked.

“Scrambling now.” There was a roar from the hangar bay eleven floors down, and Tony saw a Quinjet shoot from the building, banking up into the New York dawn. He fired his thrusters and took off. JARVIS barely got the doors open before Tony shattered right through them.

“You said sixth?” Tony asked.

“Yep.”

“Who’s with you?”

“Steve and Maria,” Clint said.

Steve’s voice joined in, but as an indecipherable mumble in the background.
Clint said, “Steve wants me to-

“Hold up,” Tony said, and overrode the internal PA system of the jet. “Better?”

“Stop taking control of my ship!” Clint protested.

“Save it,” Steve ordered. “This is efficient. Tony, we’ve got Darcy and Jane watching news feeds and satellite imagery from the Tower. They’re looped into my earpiece.”

Tony muted himself briefly, said, “JARVIS, get that audio feed coming into my helmet,” unmuted his microphone, and replied. “Great. What’s the situation?”

Then he swung around the corner onto Sixth, just ahead of the Quinjet, and roared to a halt.

“Damn,” he muttered.

Three armored trucks of the kind used to transport large amounts of cash were tearing down the street. Men in body armor clung to their roofs and hung out the windows, screaming and shooting at nearby windows. There was a bank four blocks up; JARVIS highlighted the shattered walls where the trucks had burst out of its parking garage.

The lead truck slowed, then jogged down a side street.

“Yep, they noticed us,” Clint said, and Tony took off in pursuit.

He dodged four blasts, absorbed one more, and threw himself into the truck in the middle. Tony’s armored body slammed into the side. It veered sideways and into a line of parallel-parked cars, driving straight up and over three other vehicles until Tony fired his thrusters again and the truck flipped and screeched to a halt.

Tony picked himself off the pavement, blasted a suspect who was aiming a Chitauri gun at him, and tackled another before he could flee into an alley. The other two were still stuck in the cab, so Tony took off again.

There was fighting on the third truck. It had dodged the wreckage, but it looked like Steve was on board and handling the four men on the roof benches. The jet had gone ahead and was taking potshots at the frantically dodging truck out in the lead. They were already four blocks ahead.

Tony took off again and slammed through the soldiers fighting Steve, leaving three of them on the pavement, and chased down the truck in front.

It jinked sideways down a narrow street. The Quinjet banked hard, didn’t make it, and screamed into a vertical ascent to avoid crashing into the building. Tony angled around the corner.

Bullets and energy blasts ricocheted around him. Tony had to slow down and fall behind the truck. It was too narrow to dodge effectively.

“JARVIS, I wanna poke it with something,” Tony said.

“Targeting.”

A plate on Tony’s shoulder shifted aside and three tiny guided missiles shrieked out, aiming straight for the truck.

Each one hit somewhere on the truck’s back end. One of them took out a tire, another the rear door, and the third exploded near its top edge. The truck screeched and jolted. The shots stopped coming.
Tony caught up, drop-kicked a man off the roof and blasted two others, and then dove feet-first through the windshield.

Screams from the guards played in Tony’s helmet through the audio input. He blasted open the passenger door, shoved one of the thieves out, and wrenched the wheel. He meant to turn the truck and keep it on the road, but the driver pulled the wheel at the same time, and it spun almost all the way around. The front wheels locked and the truck tipped.

For one long moment, the world hung precariously upside-down.

Tony grabbed the driver by the arm and blasted out of the shattered cab.

The truck slammed down and rolled with tremendous force.

Tony skidded to a halt on the pavement, holding the driver in the suit’s arms, then shoved the man aside and stood up. The street was quiet. The four men from the lead truck were scattered about the street in various states of consciousness.

Tony felt like the moment when you’ve been suffocating under water and you finally come up for air. Like he hadn’t taken a full breath in the last month and was only just now remembering what it felt like.

“Stark!” Steve’s voice snapped through Tony’s open comms line. “What’s your status?”

“All good here,” Tony said. He flexed his fingers and grinned at the truck. He felt electrified, and not just because of his arc reactor.

“Not quite,” Darcy said. “The news coverage’s already starting. You need to get back to the Tower. There are some people who are really not happy with your guys.”

“What is wrong with these people!” Tony raged.

Across the table, Darcy threw her hands up. “It would help if you would calm down, Tony.”

“This is your fault,” Steve pointed out.

Tony whirled on the other man, furious. All he knew was that he had been doing something good, something helpful, and it had been a dam between him and—and—

But the goddamn talking heads on the news were calling him a reckless fool who endangered lives.

“What was I supposed to do? Pretend it wasn’t happening?” he snapped. “Let them get away?”

“You were reckless. They’re not wrong about that,” Steve said.

Tony glared at Steve and did his best to contain the storm inside his skin. Grief and anger and frustration made a toxic combination and he wanted to either beat his fists bloody on a punching bag or drink himself into oblivion.

“Wait until you’re the one they’re condemning,” Tony snapped. “Then you won’t be so forgiving.”

“Tony-”

“Whatever.” Tony turned to go.
“You’re not leaving the tower.”

He turned around with seriously? written all over his face.

Darcy was standing up and smiling sweetly.


Darcy’s smile acquired an edge. How had he ever thought this girl was just Jane’s dumb intern? It had been a short-lived miscalculation, but still. “I’m gonna say no to that one. For your own good. JARVIS, don’t let him leave.”

“Consider it done, Miss Lewis,” JARVIS said.

“Seriously?” Tony shouted at the ceiling. “Traitor.”

“I have a protocol which requires me to ensure your continued health and safety, Mr. Stark. I suspect that should you leave the tower tonight, you might engage in self-endangering behaviors.”

“Go to hell,” Tony muttered. “Fine. I’m getting blind drunk in my penthouse. Don’t worry, Mom, I won’t tie a rope out the window out of my bedsheets,” he added. “If anyone tries to get in, I’ll blast them.”

He stalked out.

He didn’t get drunk.

Well, not very. A couple glasses of Scotch down and Tony felt the wave begin to recede slightly. But he found himself wanting to find another way out. Another way to cope.

Pepper never liked seeing him like this.

Tony reached out for the only other escape he knew.

“JARVIS, lemme have the protocols from the Pentagon in oh-nine,” he said. “Screen four.”

“Yes, sir.”

The file opened, and lines of code began scrolling down the screen. Tony made tweaks and adjustments and alterations, updating for newer firewalls and security defenses. JARVIS applied his considerable processing power to the code and brought it to sentience. This was part of the reason Tony had created JARVIS in the first place: with the AI’s algorithms and neural network, any hack job went from taking months to weeks or days.

Tony worked until his hands hurt and his eyes burned, drinking coffee and alcohol to keep himself awake and buzzed.

“Sir, the program is ready for deployment.”

“Go,” Tony said, and knocked back a shot. He wasn’t sure what number this was. He lost count around four.

“Running. Estimated time remaining: three weeks, four days, and forty-seven minutes.”
“Great,” Tony mumbled. “Will I get some files before then?”

“It is possible that some surface networks will be breached in less than that time.”

“Awesome.” Tony climbed to his feet. The room swayed around him, but his purpose was clear, and he let himself relax for the first time in weeks. The alcohol and caffeine and the goal—hacking into SHIELD’s files—held back everything he didn’t want to feel.

Victorious, Tony staggered into the guest room of his penthouse suite and collapsed face-first into the clean sheets.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Avengers Tower, New York, United States

May 2011

Clint wasn’t sure when they’d picked up his tail, but he knew he had to lose them soon.

There were at least five of Fury’s lackeys following him. Two in the car behind him, another one on the street, and there were two other vehicles rotating in and out of the lineup in an effort to keep him from noticing. He’d noticed. If he hadn’t been so concerned with losing SHIELD before he led Fury straight to Tasha, Clint would’ve been insulted.

He sighed and put on his right turn signal at the last second. The car screeched around the corner and Clint floored it. He’d lose at least the one on foot this way, unless one of his buddies stopped to pick him up.

The other car, an ugly little Honda thing, accelerated with a burst of nasty brackish smoke. Clint rolled his eyes and dodged the other vehicles in his path, aiming for the subway station.

There. He spun the wheel and spun haphazardly into a parking space. He threw the car in park and took off without bothering to lock the doors.

Behind him, brakes squealed and doors slammed. Clint didn’t look back. He dove into the rush-hour crowds around the entrance to the subway station and ducked down, making himself shorter and more jagged-strided. His whole posture, gait, and air changed in an instant. Clint yanked off his black baseball cap, exchanged it for a sky-blue beanie, and deposited the cap in a trash can on his way. The next thing to go was his jacket; he yanked it off, turned it inside out, and pulled it back on, all in the space of a few seconds. It had taken a lot of practice to be able to do that motion so quickly, and with a backpack on. The jacket’s inside was beige.

Colors reversed, Clint changed posture again, just a little bit, and ducked into the thick of the crowd.

He kept his eyes down but his ears and peripheral vision were on high alert, scanning around him.

There. Up ahead—the man from the tail car. Clint caught a glimpse in profile and changed course slightly to put a bit more distance between them.

By the time he got to the train, there were no more agents within sight. Clint didn’t let himself relax. These were SHIELD agents, and Fury would’ve put some really well-trained people out to tail Clint. Maybe not the best, though. He shouldn’t have been expecting Clint to run. Probably he was just hoping Tasha would turn up to see Clint.

At least Fury had something right. Clint and Tasha would find their way back to each other. But this time, Clint was done waiting for Tasha to swallow her pride and admit that she needed help. She was taking off on her own into the heart of a country where the name of the Black Widow was whispered in ghost stories among the most covert circles, where her enemies were as common as tuberculosis in overcrowded Russian prisons.

There were two subways up ahead, as Clint knew there would be: one that connected to a train
bound for New York and eventually the border; the other would meet a train heading south for Atlanta. He could’ve made it on either, really. That didn’t matter.

Clint started toward the New York train.

Unease twisted his stomach.

He slowed down slightly and ramped up his situational awareness. Nothing, nothing—at least, nothing he could see. But his instincts were never wrong, and right now they were screaming that there was someone watching him. That he was in danger.

“No help for it,” Clint muttered, and walked a little faster.

The feeling faded a bit once he was on board, but Clint still didn’t lower his guard. This was the dangerous part for too many operatives. Getting complacent, easing up too soon—those were the things that tanked many an operation.

He stuffed the jacket and beanie away inside his backpack. Underneath, he was wearing only a T-shirt in a neutral shade of green.

Clint moved slowly through the subway car, cautious but pretending to be absorbed in his cell phone. The other passengers ignored him entirely. There was a woman reading the newspaper, another in a burka scrolling through her phone, a group of young people between sixteen and twenty in an assortment of torn jeans and flat-billed trucker caps, and a hassled man with a baby in a stroller. The rest of the car was taken up by men and women in professional clothing, most on laptops or phones. Clint smirked at the guy using a Bluetooth earpiece who looked like he was talking to thin air.

Oh, what the hell.

Clint reached into a side pocket of his backpack and curled his fingers around a jammer.

Seconds later, he saw the reactions as every person who’d been on a phone or tablet suddenly came alert. Annoyed looks crossed their faces and fingers stabbed angrily at screens.

Clint grinned. Causing a little havoc was always fun.

Most of the commuters poured out of the subway car at the next stop, which was near downtown. Clint was left with the newspaper woman, the father and his baby, and the teenagers.

Three more people poured onto the subway car just as the doors began to close.

Clint maintained his relaxed posture and made sure he appeared to be entirely lost in his phone. He looked nothing like the highly trained assassin/spy/special operative that he was. Then again, the three people who’d just boarded didn’t look very suspicious, either, and Clint’s instincts were twitching. They were perfectly innocuous: two men in simple professional clothes and a woman in workout clothes. But inside, the little voice in Clint’s head screamed Get out get out get out right now.

The subway started to move.

They rumbled out of the station and into the tunnel, and that was when the woman moved.

She swung the hefty GPS running watch up and pressed the button.
Clint dodged and the Taser’s prongs shot past him and found a mark in one of the teenagers. The girl went thrashing to a chorus of screams from her friends.

The two men in business suits pulled guns from beneath their suit jackets.

Clint threw himself into a roll, got inside the range of the Taser woman, and socked her in the stomach. She choked and fell back but her training was solid and she kept her feet.

Shit.

Amidst the screaming and panic of the newspaper lady and the teenagers and the young father, Clint and his assailants stood frozen. Taser was trying to get her wind back and Suits 1 and 2 had no clear shot at Clint.

“I don’t want to do this,” Clint said. “I have no quarrel with SHIELD.”

“Evidently our Director has a quarrel with you,” sneered Suit 2, and fired.

The bullet—rubber by the sound of the shot—went wide. Clint threw himself forward into Taser, ignored the blows that landed on his ribs and near his groin, and detonated a smoke grenade halfway through the fall.

Green-gray smoke hissed out, rebounded off the walls of the subway car, and engulfed its occupants. The frantic civvies panicked more. Someone rebounded off Clint like a bowling pin. He was blind as the rest but he had training. He found a pressure point on Taser’s neck. She was out in seconds. He rolled aside as a rubber bullet bounced through the space he’d occupied a heartbeat before and dropped belly-down. The smoke would rise—it was ever-so-slightly less dense than typical air, and usually left a few inches of space less obscured near the floor.

Sure enough, Clint could see through the haze well enough to pick out two pairs of shiny shoes. They moved in a practiced tactical pattern toward Taser’s body.

They’d never get there.

Silently, he crept along the floor until he was within two feet of Suit 1.

Clint popped a slender needle out of the metal plate on the braided leather wristband he always wore. It was a gift from Tasha for Christmas four years ago.

He lashed out and pricked Suit 1’s ankle.

“What the-”

The words cut off as Suit 1 swayed.

The subway roared around a corner.

Suit 1 collapsed.

“Jenson,” hissed Suit 2. “Jenson, come in.”

Clint rose off the ground and got a bowstring around Suit 2’s neck from behind.

“Tell Fury not to start any more shit,” Clint gasped into Suit 2’s ear, “so I don’t have to finish it.”

Suit 2 struggled, but Clint was stronger and the bowstring was too thin for the man’s fingers to grasp.
He thrashed around a bit and then went limp.

Clint dropped his body and felt through the smoke for the man’s neck. It was inflamed to the touch, but he was still breathing. They all were. Good. He was done with SHIELD, but that didn’t mean he wanted to cost Fury any more blood pressure meds than he had to.

With one last check of his gear, Clint tugged his jacket back on, navigated the minefield of still-terrified civvies who were now talking loudly about how their phones weren’t working, dropped the jammer on the floor so their phones would continue to not work, kicked out the back door of the subway car, and waited.

Smoke poured from the gap in the subway, sucked out by the pressure drop created by the speed. Clint had seconds before he’d be visible again to the other occupants.

Light flared along the wall of the tunnel.

He hurled himself into the black.

Instead of splattering on the wall, Clint landed and rolled in a maintenance access platform.

The train roared by and was gone.

With a groan, Clint flipped over and climbed to his feet. He’d taken harder hits, but that hadn’t exactly been a picnic.

He glanced around. The access landing was only twenty feet wide.

Shaking his head, Clint grabbed a fire extinguisher, broke the lock off the door, and slid into the maintenance tunnels.

He’d forgotten how much he hated Russia.

Clint scowled at everything: the people, the streets, the buildings, the snow crusted in alleys even though it was May, goddammit. No one had ever taught Russia the meaning of “spring.” It went straight from winter to summer and somehow both seasons managed to be unpleasant. Although winter was definitely worse. Good job choosing May instead of January to go haring off after your soldier lover, Tasha.

Clint thought briefly of Maria, as he had so often on the four flights and three train rides it had taken to get here. She’d be pissed. And possibly jealous. Clint would have to explain things to her when he got back. He’d only realized as he was settling in on the train to Quebec City that Maria would probably take this as Clint being romantically attached to Tasha. As if—Tasha was twice his age and terrifying on a good day. But he owed her. He couldn’t just let her waltz off to Russia without backup. That was no way to be a friend or a teammate.

What about the rest of the Avengers? Your other teammates? whispered a nasty little voice in his head. Clint shoved it away. They could take care of each other in his absence.

“Three nights, please,” Clint said in flawless Russian.

The woman behind the hotel counter frowned at him. “Passport?”

“I have this,” Clint said, and pulled out a (fake) standard-issue Russian driver’s license. The woman
barely glanced at it, took the stack of rubles he shoved her way, and handed him a key. “Room thirty-eight. Second floor.”

“Thank you,” Clint said, and took the stairs.

The hotel room was basic but perfect for his needs. This shitty little hotel on the outskirts of Chita would be his base of operations for the next few days, until he tracked down Tasha’s trail. Then he’d be gone like smoke in a blue sky.

This is what you get for training me so well, Fury, Clint thought with grim delight. He pulled out his laptop and other supplies and began setting up the workstation that he’d used dozens of times before. It provided everything he needed but the essentials could be packed up within the span of five minutes. You can’t find me if I don’t want to be found.

Chapter End Notes

I think I've been manipulated...

Someone calls me out on slow chapters. I get annoyed. I post a new chapter sooner than I planned. Whoever you are, clever move, I applaud you.

If anyone else has been frustrated by the slow pace, I'd like to say 1. I'm sorry, 2. I was trying to slow things down for a bit and character develop, 3. it's going to pick up again here soon.

As always, thanks so much to everyone who comments and leaves kudos; it means a lot!
New York, United States

June 2011

The clothes itched.

Loki rubbed irritatedly at his elbow. Maintaining a full illusion for hours on end was taxing, particularly when he was holding a constant shield up to stay hidden from Heimdall. Everything was simpler to simply steal the necessary garments from a Midgardian man and clothe himself as would the man he was impersonating.

He smirked at the thought of Derek Bord, CNN reporter. Distasteful man. Loki had watched him take one too many passes at a waitress’ private bodily regions and decided quickly that Mr. Bord had a little bit of vengeance coming his way. The reporter was currently trapped in an unpleasant vision spell in his own home with enough food to get him by for a few days. Hopefully. Loki still didn’t understand the limitations of these fragile Midgardian bodies. He’d go back when he was done with Derek Bord’s visage and release the man from the vision, wipe his memory, and be on his way.

But for now, this was what he needed to get close to Darcy Lewis. So this was the face he wore.

Even though Loki rather hated it. His own was so much more attractive.

A spell alerted him. Loki straightened and his gaze snapped to attention on the front door.

There she was.

Darcy Lewis stepped out of the automatic doors and ducked her head over her phone. She turned left out of the doors.

He didn’t know where she was going, but he didn’t need to.

Loki crossed the street and fell into step behind her.

She tried to hide it, but he caught the moment when she realized she was being followed, and not very subtly either.

“Miss Lewis,” he said quietly.

Darcy Lewis turned and caught him in her eyes. “Mr. Bord, I believe.”

“It’s a pleasure to see you again,” he said.

She raised one eyebrow. “I’m afraid I can’t say the same. If you wish to schedule an interview, our PR department-”

“That’s not what I’m here for,” Loki interrupted, and brought beads of perspiration to his illusion’s forehead. He glanced around nervously and shoved his hands in his pockets. “I need to speak with you.”
“About…”

Loki stepped closer and lowered his voice, careful to keep the predatory intensity he knew was in his own eyes out of those of his illusion. “I’m a reporter,” he said quietly. “I have a carte blanche to speak with some… very well-placed people. People in the State Department, for example.”

“People like the Secretary?” Darcy Lewis asked. Her attention had focused, sharpened. Loki resisted a smile. The Midgardian television spoke of the Hulk, or Iron Man, or Captain America, as being the most powerful of the Avengers. He knew they were not entirely correct. Here was one of the most dangerous people among the group who had stopped the Chitauri. She had so much potential for chaos, so much ambition, such a clever mind—especially for a Midgardian—that it was fascinating.

“People like the Secretary’s aides,” Loki corrected. “People who support the Avengers, and who would like me to pass on a warning.”

Darcy Lewis cocked her head. “What’s the warning, messenger boy?”

O, that was a challenge. Loki was looking forward to matching wits with this one. He would win, of course; he always did. But she would present an interesting diversion during his incarceration on Midgard.

“Let’s speak somewhere a little less visible?” Loki suggested.

Miss Lewis checked her watch. “I have half an hour. There’s a cafe a block down. Good?”

“That’ll do,” Loki agreed.

They set off down the street.

Chapter End Notes

LOKI HAS RETURNED!!!!

No, of course I'm not irrationally excited about this fact, why do you ask? ;D
Chapter 44

[Classified Location], Russia

June 2011

The bunker was quiet, but not abandoned.

Natasha’s hands shook. She clenched them into fists and reveled in the sticky half-dried blood coating her palms.

Four more lives to add to her tally, and she had been inside less than an hour. But these she would not regret. These were KGB. Her old masters. The people who, according to her source, had her Soldier locked away somewhere in here.

She crept through darkened hallways lined with ancient steel and iron. Rust grew in the corners and the ugly fluorescent lights above her head flickered irregularly. The corridor curved ahead of her, essentially a large metal pipe with a metal catwalk leveling the floor about a quarter of the way up from its bottom.

Footsteps.

Natasha stepped aside and folded herself down into the gap between the raised walkway and the floor. Grime and moisture instantly coated her palms. She ignored it. She’d had worse.

Through the small gaps in the porous metal of the walkway, she noted that the person approaching was wearing an open white lab coat, and he was alone.

Excellent.

He passed overhead, absorbed in a tablet of some kind.

Natasha slipped silently from her hiding place and came up behind him, knife in hand.

The scientist froze when he felt the cold metal.

“Scream and you die,” Natasha said in Russian. The familiar syllables of her native language felt like coming home.

He nodded stiffly.

“Where is the Winter Soldier?”

“I do not know who you mean,” the scientist gasped.

She jabbed him with the knife.

“Okay, okay,” he said, flinching. She felt moisture on her fingers and realized she’d cut him a little.

The scientist fumbled with his tablet. “Look—here, I’ll find the blueprints—”

“Don’t bother,” Natasha said. “You’re going to lead me there. You’re going to answer some questions along the way. If you warn anyone, you die. If you try to run, you die. If you attempt to trick me or lead me astray, I will notice, and you will die.” She shoved the scientist away and he
whipped around to face her. Natasha fixed him with her coldest glare. “And believe me,” she continued, “if there is a life after this one, your family and anyone else you care about will join you there soon.”

The scientist nodded shakily.

Natasha smiled kindly at him. “Lead the way, doctor.”

Shakily, the doctor turned off his tablet and tucked it in by his side. They set off back the way he’d come.

“Why is the Soldier here?” Natasha asked.

“He—ah—they were having some performance issues,” the doctor stuttered. “The—neural programming, it—was faulty. This was… a temporary solution, until it could be determined what… what was causing the lapses.”

“And before that? What have you been doing with him for the last twenty-one years?” Natasha demanded.

The scientist squirmed. Natasha jabbed him lightly in the spine with her blade. “Answer me.”

“Ah—missions,” the man said.

“KGB?”

There was a pause.

Natasha narrowed her eyes. “KGB?”

“No,” he admitted. “Not entirely.”

Gunfire shredded the corridor.

Natasha dove aside. The scientist took the brunt of the bullets. She rolled beneath the catwalk again and bolted in a low crouch in the direction of the shots.

Three guards.

Bullet traceries tore through the metal. They knew or suspected she was coming. A line of pain traced Natasha’s ribs. She ignored it, pulled out a flash grenade, threw it underhanded up the wall. It rolled around the curve of the tunnel and clanged on the metal above.

She shut her eyes. Pinned her hands over her ears.

Bang

Natasha climbed up from beneath the catwalk and found the three guards moaning on the ground. She grabbed an assault rifle from one of them and noted that none of them was wearing a keycard or ID of any kind. No KGB logo, no indication of who they worked for.

Interesting.

But unimportant.

She put a bullet in each of their heads, rolled their bodies beneath the catwalk, and went back for the
scientist.

He was dead. Rifle fire had shredded his chest and head. Natasha nudged the body with her toe in irritation, grabbed his tablet, and rolled the scientist under the catwalk as well. She examined her prize. The screen was cracked and there was a bullet hole in one corner, but it still functioned.

She turned it on and examined the blueprints that were still up from the scientist’s frantic attempts to save his own life.

Natasha examined the plans carefully, figured out where she was, and extrapolated based on the route she and the scientist had been on.

She set off in a soundless jog.

For fifteen minutes, Natasha traced her way through the bunker that apparently was being used by someone not the KGB. She could sort that out later. Or maybe she would kill everyone involved and then it wouldn’t matter.

There.

A door plastered with warning signs in eleven languages, all of which Natasha knew, loomed ahead. All of them mentioned “cryo storage”.

Long-slumbering rage burst into full flame.

Natasha strode forward, fists clenched, and threw secrecy to the four winds. She lifted the assault rifle and held the trigger back until the lock on the door was gone.

Inside was an antechamber. Natasha plowed through it and through the much-flimsier door on the other side.

Her feet froze to the floor.

Almost literally.

A layer of ice crusted the ceiling and the corners of the room. Clearly, the technology they were using was old and leaky. The air smelled chemical-blue. Four vertical cryo tubes stood along the back wall. Only three of them were empty.

Natasha stepped in a dream across the room until she was looking up at the face she had seen behind her closed eyes for two decades. Distorted by ice, marked with two new scars, sleeping, but still him. Still recognizable.


Still as if in a dream, she walked over to the corner of the control panel and started tapping away. The machine was old, its firewalls easily cracked.

*Begin thawing? Y/N* flashed on the screen.

“Yes,” Natasha hissed, and stabbed at the *Yes* option.

There was a hiss. Seconds later, warm air flooded the room.
Accompanied by the drip of melting ice, Natasha left that pane and began to slog her way through the old bunker’s network. There was very little usable information. Clearly, the whole thing was mainly a refrigerator for her Zima.

Here was something.

Natasha narrowed her eyes and leaned in closer, trying to decipher the Russian characters on the screen. It was a scanned copy of a handwritten document. The handwriting was a mess and the quality was poor, but she got a date, a time, and a location. There was a meeting of the people who were going to use her Soldier, to wake him up and—her blood ran cold at the description of what they would do to his mind. What they had already done, numerous times, to keep him docile and complacent. To erase him.

The rage found fuel in her fear and burned hotter.

But even in the heights of fury, Natasha maintained her control. She took a steadying breath and forced herself to stay still. Focus. She had to leave a message for her Soldier somehow.

She found a marker in the antechamber and scrawled on the wall: **Zima. Winter Soldier.** and drew an arrow pointing down towards the floor. She would record herself on the tablet and leave it there for him.

“Zima,” she whispered into the camera, caressing the Russian syllables, relishing the taste of his name on her lips after so long. “My Soldier. I do not know if you remember me,” she began. “My name is Natalia Romanova. The Black Widow. For years, I was your partner. And more. We met in 1953. In 1990, it was discovered that you were… compromised. We were separated. I was lied to.”

Natasha took a deep breath. “I have sworn vengeance on those who did this to you, to us. In the control panel is all the information about what they’ve been doing to you to try and keep you docile, keep you from remembering. You are free now. I am going after my revenge. When you wake, if I am not here, know that I will come for you, Zima. I will always find you. There is no force in this world can keep us apart.”

She realized hot tears were rolling down her face, and did not care. He was her Soldier. He was the only person in the world she trusted to see her vulnerable, broken.

“I loved you for fifty-three years,” she murmured. “And I love you still. Try to remember who you are.”

Natasha rose and centered herself. In order to ensure that her Zima would not be discovered, there was only one thing she could do before she left.

Paint this bunker red.

She lifted her half-spent assault rifle from the floor and settled its weight against her right shoulder like an old friend.
New York, United States

June 2011

Darcy couldn’t contain her curiosity.

Bord’s warning had been appropriately cryptic to imply that there was someone in the State Department trying to help the Avengers. It was entirely plausible. Ross wasn’t exactly coming over for Sunday dinner at the tower, but if someone was sending a message her way, then it was worse than she had imagined.

She settled her nerves. Darcy knew she’d need all her wits for the game of wits she knew was about to happen. Bord was more than just a messenger boy. He was involved in this too, somehow. And Darcy decided, as she pushed open the door to her favorite coffee shop, that she would use him however she needed to in order to keep the Avengers protected.

They were the first family she’d had since Lizzie died. And Darcy wasn’t going to just give up on this opportunity so easily.

She ordered a frappuccino and watched Bord examine the menu with a critical eye. He finally settled on an expensive imported Italian roast, ordered it black, and collected his drink right after hers.

They sat down at a corner table. Darcy noted the way Bord angled toward the seat with its back to the room, but she pretended not to notice him and took it for herself, careful to leave her lanyard with her keys right next to her left hand.

“So,” Darcy said. “Messenger boy. What’s your message?”

Bord fixed her with his gaze. It was startlingly intense, and—had his eyes always been that green? She didn’t think so.

“My message…” he said. “It regards an external threat to the Avengers. One of which you are as yet unaware.”

Darcy grinned. “I’m not an Avenger.”

“I shall pretend I believe you for now. In the interest of keeping this conversation moving.” Bord raised an eyebrow at her and took a sip of his coffee. “However, I must confess that this threat does not come from the State Department.”

Darcy set her frappuccino down with a thunk. “No?”

“I had to find some method by which to catch your attention,” Bord said, and shrugged. “I apologize for the deception, but it was necessary.”

Darcy considered. She’d probably have done the same thing. She nodded for him to continue.

“What would you say if I told you I have knowledge of the involvement of a third party in the Battle of New York? A third party who was influencing the actions of the Asgardian, Loki?”
“I would say… that it is a possibility which has already presented itself to the Avengers,” she said slowly. Her fingers curled around her drink, mostly as a way to keep them occupied so she didn’t fidget and betray her anticipation.

Bord smiled. “Has it now.”

Darcy took another drink and didn’t reply.

“The Avengers are more intelligent than one might expect,” he mused.

“I’m not exactly unfamiliar with being underestimated,” Darcy said. “I’m practically a professional at this point. The Avengers… not so much.”

“You are often overlooked, are you not?” Bord asked.

“Depends on what’s being looked at,” she retorted. “My mind or my other assets.”

He laughed.

*I like his laugh*, she thought. Sharp and surprised, as though he didn’t laugh often and wasn’t used to people who amused him to the point of laughter.

“So what’s this threat you keep alluding to? And how do you know about it?” Darcy asked.

Bord hesitated.

Darcy tapped her fingers against her car key ring, careful to keep the side showing Tony’s alterations hidden behind her wrist.

“My name is not Derek Bord,” he said at last. Softly.

Darcy’s spine tingled. It was the gut instinct that told her she’d stumbled across something big. Something she could use. She leaned forward. “You don’t seem like a Derek,” she agreed, keeping her voice light.

“My name… is Loki.”

A flicker of green light played about his temples. The guise of Derek Bord faded away, torn apart in strips like paint peeling off a door, until Darcy sat looking at Loki of Asgard once again.

This time, there was no glass between them.

“Well,” she said. “That’s one hell of a plot twist.”

“Thank you for not screaming,” he said.

She shrugged, using the movement to get her fingers around the key fob. Her heart pounded but her voice remained steady. “I have a funny feeling you’d silence me before I got a word out. With your weird voodoo powers and shit.”

Loki’s brows furrowed. Darcy hid the fear and excitement in her gut that were ramping up to eleven (and *why* did he have to be so unfairly attractive?) and fingered the buttons on the key fob. One was a red panic button; the other Avengers would be there in minutes, suited up and guns blazing.

The other, the blue one, would bring just one or two of them. Subtly. To check things out. A message that said “I’m in a situation, I might need backup, but don’t come in shooting”.
“What is… voodoo?” Loki asked. “Forgive my lapse. Allspeak fails on occasion when using technical or colloquial words.”

“Uh… your witchy magic,” Darcy said. He hadn’t hurt her yet. He’d had plenty of opportunity to snatch her off the street and she had no doubt he could’ve wiped her mind and turned her into a drooling idiot, given proper preparation. This was Loki. She and Jane had heard plenty of stories from Thor. He wanted something else, and she wanted to know what it was. “Apparently you’re a famous magician. You could make a fortune here pulling rabbits out of hats.”

Loki appeared to disregard her humor. Possibly he didn’t understand it. She would have to teach him Midgardian cultural ref-

No! Darcy scolded herself. She shouldn’t be making these plans as if… as if they were going to be seeing more of one another. This was Loki. She should be mashing the red button flat.

But she couldn’t deny… she was intrigued.

Darcy pressed the blue button and narrowed her eyes at him. “Okay. So I’m assuming this has to do with your dumbass invasion plan—” Loki choked—“the mysterious orders to Selvig for him to build a fail-safe into the portal, the way you left the scepter for us, the fact that a supposedly brilliant strategist tried a chokepoint invasion with an army on a connected neural network? Care to explain any of that?”

Loki smiled. He looked like a wolf, or something equally predatory. “I am impressed,” he said. “The young Midgardian woman picked up on all the hints I left before any other of the Avengers. I admit I underestimated you as well. No longer.”

“Everyone does. You gonna tell me or do I have to guess?”

“I’ll tell you,” Loki promised. “But I have a few… conditions.”

Darcy sighed and tossed back the last of her coffee. “Had to be a catch. What do you want?”

“Sanctuary,” Loki said simply.

Darcy blinked. “Come again?”

He shrugged and swirled the remains of his coffee. “It is becoming rather exhausting to maintain an illusion whenever I am out among the Midgardian population. Your special forces have my face programmed into every one of their facial recognition… algorithms, I believe you call them. And especially as a significant portion of my power is going into keeping myself concealed from Heimdall’s sight…”

“Heimdall. The all-seeing gatekeeper dude,” Darcy said. “Right?”

“Indeed. His power is far-reaching. It took me centuries to develop a method of hiding myself.”

“So what would he see right now?” Darcy asked, stalling.

Loki smirked. “Merely a silly Midgardian woman out on a vapid date.”

“Flattering,” Darcy muttered. “So you’ll answer all our questions in exchange for rent?”

“If I may inhabit your Tower, then I need not concern myself with detection by Midgardian sources,” Loki said.
“You’re going to have to give us more than answers,” Darcy said. “Help on the voodoo side, for example. Protecting the tower with it. Whatever you can do. And I’ll bet, between Jane and me, we have a pretty good handle on what your abilities are, so no cheating.”

“We can discuss it,” Loki said simply.

Darcy’s eyes were caught by a vehicle pulling to the curb outside. One she recognized. “So what now?”

“I explain to you. You may return to your Tower and speak with your team, convince them. Or not, as the case may be. When you next exit the Tower, I will find you,” Loki said.

The door jingled as it opened. Tony and Steve stepped inside, wearing semi-decent disguises—Steve was in his typical leather-jacket-sunglasses-and-a-baseball-cap-now-I’m-totally-invisible suit. Tony was also wearing sunglasses, and with his hair flattened by a beanie and a hideous oversize hoodie, he was much less recognizable than Steve. They scanned the room. Darcy saw their gazes turn incredulous, then furious, when they spotted her and her coffee date.

Darcy shot Loki her own wolf grin. “Actually, it’s gonna go down a little differently.”

Tony dropped into the empty third chair at their table while Steve leaned against the wall behind Loki. “Good to see you again, Reindeer Games,” Tony said. “You owe me for that broken window. And the broken city.”

Loki sneered, any humanity gone from his face. “It is not yours to claim reparations for.”

“Quit,” Darcy ordered. Amazingly, both men backed down.

Steve shot Darcy a shocked look.

She winked back at him and focused in on Tony and Steve. “So remember how we were saying it sucks we can’t interview Loki?” she asked.

Steve sighed and, thankfully, kept his voice down. “I didn’t mean for you to go find him without telling us—”

“He’s telling the truth,” Darcy said. “Anyway. Back to my point. All we have to do for answers and some voodoo protection for the Tower is give him free rent for a bit.”

“Rent? Like in an apartment in Queens?” Steve asked.

Darcy rolled her eyes. “I really can’t see that ending well, do you?”

“So what, we keep him in the Tower?” Tony asked.

“We can buy a big dog kennel if it helps you feel better,” Darcy said.

“I will not sleep in a cage like some common criminal,” Loki snapped.

Darcy glared at him. “You’re ruining my joke, idiot. Shush.”
He looked extremely taken aback. Definitely the pampered little prince wasn’t used to people talking to him like Darcy did. She was going to enjoy this.

“We can… discuss it,” Tony said reluctantly.

They looked to Steve.

At last, he sighed and nodded.

“Looks like we got ourselves a new pet,” Darcy said with a grin.

Chapter End Notes

As a warning to all of you, the next chapter is really ridiculously long because it's all one perspective. I tried breaking it up but I prefer the way it reads as one unit.

I might actually post it tomorrow (because I'm really excited lol it's a big part of the story), FYI.

As always, thanks to everyone who comments/kudos or just reads and enjoys! I take fic recommendations and concrit :)}
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

[Classified Location], Russia

June 2011

He woke to a world of pain.

His extremities burned. It took him a moment to understand that this was because his entire body was brutally, dangerously cold.

There was ice pinning him in place, surrounding his arms and legs and torso and lips. He became aware of the intrusion of tubes that sat in his mouth and ran down his throat and understood that they were keeping him alive in some way.

His muscles strained against the ice.

For too long, there was no change.

Eventually, he felt a crack. Excitement coursed through his veins with his sluggish blood. Adrenaline entered his system and kick-started his metabolism a bit. Violent shivers wracked his body and he shoved again and again at his icy prison.

There was another crack, and another.

With a crash, his left arm came free.

He lifted it before his face, aware that this was a cybernetic arm: the sensory input was muted, limited, but still sensitive enough to run his metal fingers over the ice covering his face. And strong enough to dig in and peel the ice away.

His eyelids were frozen to his cheeks, but he kept tearing and peeling until raw, cold skin hit the air of the chamber. It couldn’t have been much above freezing but it felt like an open flame after so long in the ice. He welcomed the pain.

He gripped the tubes, braced himself, and ripped them out.

They tore his throat and stomach on the way out. The coppery taste of blood flooded his mouth, but he swallowed it down and took his first independent breath in…

He couldn’t remember.

That was concerning. To say the least.

But a concern for later.

Lashes tore out when he forced his eyes open.

He was in a room lined with melting ice. Not large. Empty. Four other unused cryo tubes stood along this wall—he could turn his head enough to see that much, though his hair and much of his mobility were still pinned in the ice.
As the room warmed, slowly, and the ice melted, he slammed his left arm again and again against the column of ice containing his legs. Cracks raced up and down until it shattered in an explosion of gleaming shards.

He turned his attention to his other arm, the normal one, and strained it against its prison until it, too, came free. His clothing—he seemed to remember that he wore a simple hospital gown and nothing else—was reluctant to come free of the ice, but he pulled away, and then all that was left was his hair.

That was harder.

He wanted to simply hack it off, but there were no blades in sight and his reach was severely limited anyway, so he carefully worked all his fingers (metal and flesh) through his hair and the ice, freeing it bit by bit.

When at last he came free, his head was crowned by a mess of ice chunks frozen into his hair. Brown hair.

He realized he didn’t remember precisely what he looked like.

Free of the ice, he stumbled forward on clumsy limbs. He strained his mind.

“Soldier. Ready to comply?”

He shivered.

That was when the word on the wall caught his attention.

Zima. A word in a language he knew… but that wasn’t his first. Wasn’t the language of his thoughts. It corresponded with the word in his native language of winter, or in many others: hiver, invierno, baridi, dimër, vinter—

“Soldat Zima.” Winter Soldier.

Him.

“Zima,” said a woman’s voice in his mind. He frowned. Odd. He was… a soldier. That was familiar. But more than a common soldier. He belonged to the man in the gray suit, and before him, the old man with the medals. He was their weapon. Their iron fist.

He remembered hearing, in the language written on the wall, “He is the iron fist of our nation, and she is the velvet glove that covers it.”

She.

“Zima. Moy soldat.”

She was the one who called him Zima.

A face. There was a face in his mind. Red-headed, smirking, bloody, lips swollen—and in the memory, so were his own.

Stumbling, he made his way to the wall and fell to his knees at the base of the arrow drawn in ink. There was a glass slate on the floor—no, not all glass, that was just the screen. An unfamiliar piece of technology. How long had he been frozen? Cracks raced across its surface. There was a bullet hole in one corner.
He examined it for a few moments, then pressed a round depressed button near one edge.

The screen instantly lit up. He flinched at the clarity and brightness of the display. The device was thin as a wafer and light in his hands. He moved carefully, slowly.

Experimentation with the other buttons around the sides informed him that one of them turned the display off, two of them controlled the volume, and the round one could do nothing but wake up the display. If the device was meant to convey a message, it was doing poorly.

Or perhaps he wasn’t using it properly.

After a few moments’ thought, he tapped the display with one finger.

The image—an abstraction of a pond, and a digital time display—jolted.

Hm.

He swiped his finger from right to left.

The numbers of the digital clock display moved, but as soon as he moved his hand away, they snapped back into place. Swiping from the top down did nothing. Swiping from left to right swept the clock away and revealed a dark image. Blurred. But there was the shape of a person on it.

He tapped the screen once, experimentally.

Symbols appeared along the bottom. Play, pause, left and right arrows. He hesitated, then pressed ‘play’.

Shuffling sounds emanated from the device. The image jostled, then settled, and the darkness lifted bit by bit.

His breath caught. It was the woman. Face unbloody, this time—pale and fierce and sad. “Zima,” she said.

“How could I forget?”

There was no response. It was a recording. “My Soldier,” she continued in the language he suddenly knew was called Russian. “I do not know if you remember me.”

He sank down against the wall, cradling the tablet in his powerful mismatched hands, drinking in every word and gesture. Her voice knocked stones loose in his mind, one after another, an avalanche of memory.

He was Zima, her Soldier, her Soldat, her partner and lover. She was his Black Widow, the stiletto blade to his sword, his Spider, his Pauk, his partner and lover.

“We were separated,” she said, and he tensed all over.

He remembered now. Staring up at the viewing window, knowing she was behind it. Both of them unable to act. Then the words began to work their terrible magic and his mind slipped away piece by piece.
There was a rage growing inside him, cold and lethal, but he listened to her message. A smile twitched his lips when she told him she was chasing vengeance. Of course. His Spider, his Pauk—she wasn’t one to weep over his prostrate body.

_Zima. I am Zima. The Winter Soldier._

But even that didn’t feel quite right, and he seemed to remember that that feeling of wrongness had plagued him for years. Only with his Spider, the woman—Natalia—had the wrongness faded, and even then, not completely.

He resolved that he wouldn’t ignore it this time.

He still had to find her first.

Zima went to the control panel on the wall. This was familiar technology and he navigated it with ease, comforted by the knowledge that not long ago, Natalia’s fingers had gone through the same motions.

She’d left the things he needed easy to access. Date, location, time. Travel would be difficult. He was wearing nothing but a hospital gown, he was coated with ice, and he would need food and water and exercise to bring his body back up to minimum functionality for a fight.

First things first: warmer clothes.

Shaking the remnants of the ice from his hair, Zima took the tablet with him and left the cryochamber.

Dull memories flickered, and he navigated with ease through the bunker. He had spent several years here, before they froze him.

He passed guard after guard. All of them dead in a way that suggested a great skill and a greater rage on the part of the killer. It made him smile as he collected undamaged clothing and weaponry from the bodies. His Spider had only grown better at their work in the time he’d been gone.

He couldn’t bring himself to feel pity for the dead. They had kept him here. Kept him locked up, dull —

Memory of the pain inflicted upon him during their “treatments” made him flinch.

He filed that memory away to process later and found his way to the guards’ mess hall.

More corpses littered the floor here. His eyes flicked from one to the next, picking out the pattern: someone opens the doors, opens fire with an assault rifle, dives behind that column for cover, takes off the rest in potshots. He shook his head. Against his Pauk, they’d never had a chance.

The food was congealing in the trays, but it was by no means inedible. Zima skipped the plates, grabbed a plastic tray larger than a hubcap, and piled it with as much food as would fit. He wasn’t hungry, per se, but however many years of cryostorage had left him craving actual food.

He ate until his stomach was full, packed everything that would last a day or two into his backpack, and set off for the surface levels.

That was where they kept the helicopters.
Zima stared at the city.

It was the same, yet so different. There was the Kremlin, and the wall, and the river, and the old steeple where there used to be a cross—he’d seen pictures of the pre-USSR Russia. But the skyline was so altered; the sprawl of the city was larger… In the wake of the USSR, Moscow had become an industrialized modern city.

He ignored the voices that hailed him over the helicopter’s radio and set the craft down with some difficulty in a park in the suburbs. It was dark, and he didn’t think he was observed, but just in case, he slipped out and bear crawled along the ground until he hit an alley between ugly little houses. Then he turned around and pressed the timer. In the guts of the helicopter, he knew, the self-destruct sequence was beginning its countdown. He’d set it to half an hour. Plenty of time to get far away from here.

Luckily, the language was more or less the same. Zima eavesdropped on a few commuters on the rattly, shaky underground train system (it made his heart clench every few seconds; he didn’t think he liked modern transportation) and adjusted his diction patterns to match. It wasn’t particularly difficult to imitate the modern accent, although the slang would probably take longer.

Everywhere he looked was overwhelming.

The fashions. The vehicles. The advertisements. The behaviors. The buildings. The televisions and screens and winking technologies that he neither recognized nor understood.

Zima closed his eyes and leaned back on the hard plastic subway seat.

He trusted his senses; he’d be alerted if anything suspicious happened, or if someone attacked him. And he needed the time.

His mind could rest, and he could concentrate on calming his rage.

He still didn’t remember everything clearly, but he knew that Natalia, his Spider, was his love, and the people he still thought of as master had torn them apart.

Zima’s fingers, in his pocket, curled around a switchblade.

The subway ground to a halt.

He was the first one off and moved swiftly up the stairs to the street level. Even the tainted air of the city aboveground was better than the subway, and also better than he remembered.

Downtown Moscow.

Lights and colors and sounds assaulted Zima’s mind. He blinked and flinched and squinted around. It was nighttime, but the city didn’t seem to be gearing down for sleep in the slightest.

He realized his hands were shaking.

*Adapt, then act.*

He clenched his fists and focused on the address he needed to find. There would be time later to adjust to this modern world and its changes.

Zima went up to a vendor selling sausages and asked him directions.

The building was a glittering high-rise.
Zima frowned and checked the address again.

It was the right building. He sighed, registered the floor number, and stepped into the building.

It was… a hotel. And there was some kind of music drifting his direction.

Zima sighed and looked down at his ruthlessly plain, black clothes. Nothing about his attire suggested that he could wear it to a party.

Repairman guise again, then.

Zima returned fifteen minutes later carrying a plastic bin weighed down with water jugs. He approached the front desk with an affable smile. “Hello,” he said. “I’m here to fix the plumbing?”

“Ah… one moment,” the receptionist said, casting aside her phone. She tapped away at the computer and frowned. “I don’t see any recent calls for a plumber…”

“It was an emergency call-out,” Zima said. “Something about a problem on the bathrooms for that party? I think they need me soon, but if there’s no notification—”

The receptionist blanched. “Wh—the Musket Dinner?”

“Yes.”

“Come with me,” the receptionist said.

Well, shit. Zima didn’t want to have to kill her if she insisted on coming all the way up there.

“We have restrooms for the party here,” the receptionist said, and stopped by a door. “Half the Ministers are here. If there’s a problem with the bathrooms, we could end up shut down. Some of them are temperamental.”

“Don’t we all know it,” Zima said with a grin.

The receptionist smiled back at him. “Here.” She unlocked the door. “Service hallway. It’ll put you out in the walkway where the bathrooms are. Thanks so much for coming out on short notice.”

“No problem,” Zima said. “I can grab some vodka on the way out, maybe.”

The receptionist laughed. “I’ve got a bottle behind the desk,” she said conspiratorially. “If you’re interested.”

Zima winked. “I might just take you up on that.”

She gave him a little wave and walked away.

Zima set off down the service hallway.

The bathrooms were easy to find. He promptly broke the lock off a cleaning cabinet, filled his utility case with cleaning supplies, and stuffed it in at the bottom of the shelves with some buckets and bottles in front. The jugs of water went on the top shelf behind stacks of rags.

Satisfied that his props were firmly hidden, Zima checked that the hallway was empty and ducked into the men’s room.

It was fifteen minutes before a guest of the right size came in alone.
Zima leaped out from behind a potted plant and nailed a pressure point in his neck. The man went down hard, and Zima dragged him into a bathroom cubicle.

Five minutes later, he emerged from the bathroom, the naked guest stuffed up into the ceiling, dressed in a sharp British-made suit and feeling very proud of himself. His hair was slicked back with water from the sink and he’d shaved his scraggly facial hair with the edge of a knife. Unfortunately, Zima’d had to leave much of his arsenal behind. He still had knives strapped to his hips, a pistol on each ankle, and another in an armpit holster, and his hands were covered in plain black gloves.

It would be good enough.

Zima walked out of the bathroom and into the ballroom.

He felt horribly conspicuous with his hair unstyled and his suit unfitted, but it was late, and the majority of the guests seemed too drunk to notice.

Zima got a drink, took up a post on the corner of the room, and watched.

This was part of his training. It was half instinct and half memory to analyze the movement patterns, to figure out who had power and who wanted it and who was just there for the drinks and the good time, who was drunk and who was half sober and who—

There.

Those were the people he needed. The wary kind, the watching kind, the dead-sober waiting-for-their-time-to-move kind. Predators. Like him, like his Spider.

Except no one ever saw Zima or Natalia. They were the apex predators in any given room.

Zima saw the last sober man in the room glance around once nervously and then duck out, heading for a side hall. He grinned, tossed back the last of his Scotch, and followed.

The man led Zima straight to a conference room, one floor above. He slipped inside and the door closed behind him.

Seconds later, he heard something thunk against the door, and then a groan.

It was a quiet sound, and it could’ve had any number of causes. But Zima had spent enough time causing and experiencing pain to be intimately familiar with the sounds it elicited from people. He took two steps forward and yanked open the door.

The soundproof barrier was breached. A scream and a body spilled out.

Zima threw himself inside and into a roll as a silenced bullet spat through the door frame and embedded in the wall across the hall. He came up in a half-crouch and took in the scene.

Fifteen people standing. Seven on the ground. And there, by the window, was his Pauk.

Zima’s vision tunneled.

A man raised a gun in slow motion.

Zima threw a knife sidearm without looking away from her. It landed in the man’s throat and he fell to the ground, gasping.
In that moment, Zima didn’t care who stood between himself and his Natalia.

Her eyes found his.

Zima’s instincts took over.

He and Natalia dove into motion at the same time. Even as Zima dodged and blocked and kicked and killed, he marveled at their fighting styles, so familiar, so different, so compatible. Even after all this time, she was a dancer, impossibly graceful, her opponents no more than stage props. Zima was all brutal efficiency, using the fastest and most effective way to take someone out in the shortest amount of time. Never once did they interfere with one another. Zima smiled fiercely as their opponents died around him.

It was as if no time had passed at all.

In seconds, they found each other’s arms for the first time in Zima didn’t know how long. Tears mingled with the blood on Natalia’s face. Her russet dress was shredded and smeared with gore and blood and gunpowder. Zima pulled her close.

He’d never seen anything so beautiful.

Anyone still breathing in this room would die for seeing his Spider cry.

Their lips crushed together.

It was a hard and taking kind of kiss, no gentleness to be found. A battle in its own right. Zima knew vaguely that this was their usual. Take the assassin out of the fight, but not the fight out of the assassin.

“My Zima,” she breathed against his mouth.

Zima tightened his hold. She was definitely leaving bruises across his back with her deadly hands. He was careful not to let his metal arm grip too hard against her body.

“My spider,” he whispered back.

For several minutes, there was no talking.

“What now?” he asked at last.

Natalia smiled faintly. “Well. I’m, ah… currently without country, as they say. And I assume these goons had soldiers around. We’re going to have to fight our way out.”

“Just like old times,” he said. “Who… who were they?”

“I don’t know,” Natalia said quietly. “Not KGB. I pulled some files back at the bunker, but everything here’s dataless. No paper or digital trail whatsoever. We’ll have to figure that out later.”

Zima brushed his lips over hers one last time before he forced himself to let her go, turn his fingers back to weapons. There were plenty of guns on the floor, waiting to be conscripted. He shot her a small smile. “That’s a lot of soldiers.”

Natalia tossed him his knife back just as the sirens began to wail. “I don’t know how much you remember, but we’ve been through worse.”

“I remember enough,” he said, and followed her out the door.
Chapter End Notes

This was one of my favorite chapters to write in this whole fic.

Next chapter will also be long but dialogue-heavy-long instead of action-scenes-long. Lots of bargaining, that's all I'm going to say ;)}
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Avengers Tower, New York

June 2011

“You’re really not very subtle, Tony,” Miss Lewis commented.

Stark twisted around his headrest to glare at her. “I’m not trying to be subtle.”

Miss Lewis rolled her eyes.

Loki cast a pointed glance at the gauntlet on Stark’s hand. Sparks were popping from the energy source in the center. “You do realize that weapon can do very little to harm me, yes?”

“We bested you with it once,” Rogers snapped from the driver’s seat.

Loki lifted his chin. “I allowed myself to be taken.”

There was a pause.

“Fine, I’ll bite,” Miss Lewis said. Loki filed the expression away as another Midgardian colloquialism he ought to learn. “Why’d you let us catch you?”

“Oh, ah,” Loki said, and smirked in her direction. “Not until our bargain is sealed.”

Miss Lewis glared at him.

Loki smiled innocently and went back to looking out the window.

He ignored the tension of the other occupants of the vehicle and watched the city go by. It really was fascinating, what these Midgardians had managed to build despite their short lives and relative societal youth. Loki had not visited this realm since they were squatting around fires in huts in the far north and worshipped him as a god. He had learned that most humans now followed other deities while the Norse pantheon was largely considered myth, an irony Loki found highly amusing. The humans had certainly come a long way, though. Vast fields of crops to feed the ever-growing population, glittering cities and weaponry that could decimate millions of people in a heartbeat. It seemed that the Midgardians lacked any compunction about using their “nuclear bombs”, unlike Asgardians, who considered most weaponry beyond traditional swords, shields, and bows to be ignoble. Loki had to admire the Midgardians’ brutal efficiency in wartime, and the occasional brilliant battle commander they’d turned out in the last thousand years. Yet their accomplishments in other areas, like the arts and planetary conservation, were significant as well. Loki had seen many races use their homeworld until it was nothing but a husk. The Midgardians had gone a long time without realizing the damage they could do, but in geological time, it was a blink, and they were turning themselves around. They were nowhere near the point of no return. Loki had to admit a grudging respect. For such short-lived mortals, they burned so brightly before they died.

Darcy Lewis’ attention was fixed on Loki. He could feel her eyes on him every few seconds. He wanted to examine her more closely, as well, but refused to allow her to notice his focus. There would be plenty of time, assuming that he succeeded in sealing a bargain with the Avengers, to study
Darcy Lewis.

Loki knew a few things about her already. She had a certification—a “degree”—in a branch of academia known as ‘Political Science’ and had been a sort of student working with Jane Foster during the… incident… involving the Destroyer. That had been their first exposure to the other realms. Since then, it seemed, Miss Lewis and Miss Foster had come to work for Tony Stark, the former as part of a Public Relations team and the latter as a scientist, and while he was not entirely sure in what capacity Miss Lewis served the Avengers, Loki knew hers was a much more significant role than the Midgardian news media realized.

There was a mind lurking behind those pretty eyes, a mind like the razor whips favored by some female soldiers in the Myozarian army: wicked sharp and flickering faster than Thor’s lighting.

Loki looked over just as Miss Lewis’ eyes shifted to him again, and made eye contact.

He cocked his head and examined her with an intensity that had made every woman he’d ever known swoon. As an experiment.

Miss Lewis merely raised an eyebrow at him and turned her gaze forward again.

A faint hint of a smile crossed Loki’s lips and he settled back in his seat, just as the vehicle turned off the street and into a parking garage. This was going to be a pleasant game.

The car parked.

“Out,” Stark snapped, opening his own door.

Loki climbed out and waited patiently while Stark and Rogers cast suspicious glares at him. Neither spoke, but he could tell exactly what they were thinking: this is a terrible idea.

Loki kept his face bland and pleasant.

“Stop waffling,” Miss Lewis ordered, and grabbed Loki’s elbow. “Come on. Point weapons at his back if it makes you feel better,” she called over her shoulder to Stark and Rogers.

Loki stifled a laugh and fell into step beside Miss Lewis. After a second, Rogers and Stark began following them.

Miss Lewis resolutely didn’t look at him while they climbed into the elevator and stood in an awkward square formation. Loki hid his discomfort as the metal box jerked slightly and began to ascend. He disliked these aspects of Midgardian buildings. If it malfunctioned, even he might have a difficult time escaping before impact, and while being trapped in an elevator when it imploded wouldn’t kill him, it would cost a vast amount of energy to free and heal himself.

With a deceptively pleasant ding, the elevator doors slid open.

Miss Lewis marched out into the penthouse space.

Loki followed closely behind her. It was empty.

“Excellent job removing the dents from the floor,” he remarked idly.

Stark smiled sharply. “I was tempted to leave the one shaped like you. As a memento. But I decided it might be a safety hazard. You know, Hulk smashed you so far into the floor, someone might fall in.”
“Admirable concern for your associates,” Loki drawled.

Stark walked over to the bar.

Loki moved casually in his direction. “If it’s all the same to you, I’ll have that drink now.”

Stark snorted and grabbed an extra glass.

“JARVIS, can you send Jane and Bruce up here? Maria if she’s in,” Miss Lewis said.

A mechanized voice came through hidden speakers. Loki concealed his flinch of surprise. “I have already contacted them, save Agent Hill, who is not present. They will arrive shortly.”

“Thanks, J, you’re the best,” Miss Lewis said.

Loki accepted the glass of Midgardian liquor from Stark with a nod and took a sip. His eyebrows crept up. Loki had sampled a fair amount of alcoholic drinks in the brief time he’d spent hiding on Midgard, and this was an excellent vintage.

Miss Lewis leaned on the back of a leather sofa and pulled out her phone.

Loki walked over to stand beside her. “You don’t intend to partake?” he asked, tipping the glass in her direction.

Miss Lewis barely looked up. “Nope.”

“May I inquire why not?”

“Nope.”

“It bites,” Loki said, amused, and took another sip.

Miss Lewis ignored him.

He squashed a flicker of irritation. It only made the game more interesting to meet a woman seemingly immune to him. Darcy Lewis was a challenge, and an opponent, and a mystery.

No, he chided himself. Do not allow yourself to grow attached to a Midgardian. Five years, ten, a hundred–they die, and that’s that. I am something more.

Loki’s fingers tightened around his glass. He was a prince without a palace, nothing more. But he was heir to the throne of Jotunheim and adopted son of Odin son of Bor, and he would not allow himself to be denied his birthright much longer.

All he needed was a chance to gather his wits, repair the damage done by his–incarceration. To hide on Midgard until his strength was sufficiently restored to return to the other Realms and begin gathering forces.

He didn’t have a plan yet. No matter. Loki was nothing if not good at improvisation.

A door hissed open, and three new people walked in.

“What’s going–”

Banner’s voice cut off when his eyes fell on Loki.
Miss Foster lost a step, recovered, and marched forward.

“I am Loki-”

Her hand cracked across his face.

Loki’s head turned seventy degrees with the force. It wasn’t particularly painful, but he was impressed. He had to laugh a bit as he turned back to face the Avengers.

“That was for New York,” Miss Foster snapped.

“I like you,” Loki said with a smirk.

Miss Foster huffed and stepped back, glaring at him. Miss Lewis touched her shoulder once, lightly, with a highly amused expression on her face.

“What is he doing here?” Banner said.

Loki eyed him. “I am here because I would like to offer you a bargain,” he said.

“A bargain.” Banner did not appear inclined to make any sort of deal with him.

“He’s been pretending to be Derek Bord, a reporter for CNN,” Miss Lewis said. “He approached me today and asked for a meeting. In a coffee shop. We sat down and he was like oh, by the way, I’m actually Loki. Basically he’s offering to tell us the truth of what happened during the battle of New York if we provide safe haven.”

“Safe hav– here?” Stark’s face was turning an interesting shade of red. “Likely.”

“Let’s hear him out.”

Loki glanced at Rogers, faintly surprised. He hadn’t expected him, of all people, to be an advocate.

Rogers caught the look. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten what you’ve done,” he snapped. “But I’ve certainly noticed inconsistencies between Fury’s story and our observations. I’m willing to listen. No promises beyond that.”

Loki raised his free hand in a gesture of surrender. “That is all I ask of you. I apologize, Captain Rogers, for having used the scepter on your comrades. I understand what it is to have one’s free will stolen.”

Rogers dipped his head less than a breath. It was all the acknowledgement he would receive. Loki stepped around the sofa and the low table until he arrived at a glass conference table, and sat down at a random seat along one side. He was unfamiliar with Midgardian etiquette still, but he predicted that the seat alone at the narrow end of the table would be occupied by the leader or highest-ranked occupant of the room, and he didn’t want to usurp that position.

There was a brief moment of awkwardness in which Rogers and Stark both stepped for the chair Loki had avoided and stared at one another until Lewis grabbed Stark’s arm and pulled him into a seat just to Rogers’ left. Loki resisted a smirk. Evidently the Avengers were not so unified as they let the world believe.

That was good. Flaws, he could use.

Divide and conquer.
If he had to.

“Okay, talk,” Miss Lewis said, thumping down into a seat directly across from Loki. Foster sat next to her friend with the unconscious grace of someone entirely focused on her internal world. Banner, still silent, sat next to Stark.

“You would like to know the truth of what you call the Battle of New York, correct?” Loki said.

Rogers nodded once.

There was a bitter war waging in his heart, between his pride and his pragmatism. The first demanded that he keep his secrets, tell only the bare minimum, lie and evade to hide the depth of his weakness. The second told him that he had no choice but to be honest. If not, he risked his bargain; he risked everything he needed to get where he wanted. Darcy Lewis would be a difficult woman to fool.

Pragmatism won.

Though there was one secret he would not reveal.

“I must begin some time ago. Several hundred years by your calendar,” Loki said quietly. “There was a planet populated by a race known as the Kree. Asgard had been at war with them for centuries by your measure. There were two threats: the Kree government’s official army and the guerrilla warfare waged by armed resistance tribes or movements hiding in the undeveloped land around the cities. The Kree’s homeworld was dying from eons of abuse, and they desperately needed an end to the fighting so they could focus on restoration. They came to me to broker a peace.

“We declared a cease-fire and I convinced Odin to invite a Kree delegation to the palace of the Allfather for the first time in generations. Negotiations are not rapid, for Asgardians or for Kree, but we were making progress. Until an Asgardian military outpost on Kree soil was attacked by one of the rogue militant units, with whom the Kree government had no ties and we had no treaty. Thor used the attack as validation for a suspension of the cease-fire and reengagement with the Kree. I tried to advise Odin and my brother to do otherwise, but to no avail.

“Their homeworld was almost beyond the point of no return when Asgard’s military finally crushed the last of the resistance. With the battle won, Thor turned his sights to other plunders and conquerings, and he left me to pick up the pieces of the vanquished enemy. To become the face of Asgard in the Kree’s collective memory. They rather loathe me now.”

“But you tried to stop the war,” Lewis said.

Loki shrugged. “On Asgard, the Allfather’s word is law. He commanded me to subside, and because I had no power then to resist him, I obeyed. He commanded me to step in as Thor’s strategist in the campaign, and I did. He commanded me to take over the governing and rebuilding of the Kree homeworld in the aftermath, and I did.”

“This is why I hate monarchies,” Lewis muttered.

Loki spread his hands on the table. “Be that as it may, the incident... opened my eyes, as it were, to the way Thor and Odin beheld me. I did not like what I realized. To them, I was the forgotten son, the shadow, nothing but a crutch for Thor to lean on. I realized that though Thor and I were raised as twins, and though Odin had said he would not choose one of us as heir until later in his life, I never had a chance. He lied to me my entire life when he taught me that I could be a king.” Loki knew that his bitterness was creeping into his voice and stamped it down, returning to a cool, emotionless tone.
“Moreover, I saw what he did not: Thor was ill-suited for the throne. You know this,” he added, looking at Foster. “He has his virtues, but among his flaws I can list impulsivity, pride, arrogance, toxic nobility, a superiority complex the size of your sun. In my rage and jealousy, I arranged to disrupt his coronation. I never intended for us to go to Jotunheim. There was a guard who was supposed to stop us before we reached the Bifrost, so Odin would see that he could not hand Thor the throne. The guard was too slow. We arrived on a foreign, hostile realm. And I had no choice but to fight the Jotuns, the frost giants, so that I could bring my brother and his friends home.

“Thor was exiled. I became the sole heir to Asgard, but still Odin refused to acknowledge me. I was bitter. I intended for the second attack to come so I could kill Laufey, king of the Frost Giants, and save Odin’s life. I would prove myself to my father.” Every word tasted like vinegar in his mouth, but Loki forced himself to continue, baring his past to these people who in all likelihood wanted him dead. It was a risk. But then again, risks were his specialty. Loki loved to play the odds.

He would keep his last, greatest secret. His Frost Giant heritage—it would only terrify them. Turn them against him. Loki would never gain safe haven if the Avengers knew what he truly was.

“The plan worked,” he said. “My mother, Frigga, crowned me Regent of the throne until Odin woke… or passed. And then Sif and the Warriors Three disobeyed the express command of their sovereign, committed treason, to come to Midgard and find Thor.

“So I sent the Destroyer.

“But when I had Thor there, weak in his mortal body… I discovered that I did not want to kill him. That, despite everything, I still considered him my brother.

“I ordered the Destroyer to return to Asgard.” Loki laughed harshly. “It appears my control was not as complete as I thought. The Destroyer existed for two purposes: to serve the sitting monarch of Asgard and to protect the interests of first its realm and then its ruler. In leaving Thor alive, I broke from the second objective, and the Destroyer took action without my express command.”

“It turned away,” Darcy said softly. “Right before it backhanded him.”

Loki inclined his head in her direction. “Precisely.”

There was a long moment of silence.

“You still haven’t mentioned New York,” Rogers said at last.

“Fascinating family drama, though,” Stark added. “And I thought my dad was messed up. Assuming that you’re being honest.”

“I have nothing to lose by honesty, and everything to lose with a lie,” Loki said. “Make your decision as you will. If I may continue?” He let a bit of acid creep into his voice at the end of the question.

Lewis was smirking.

“Oh, by all means, keep talking,” Stark said. “I’m getting another drink.”

He stood up and walked to the bar, but Loki knew he was still listening.

“I lashed out. When Thor returned to Asgard and challenged me for the throne, everything I had accomplished went to ashes and dust in a heartbeat, as so many times before. I aimed the Bifrost at Jotunheim with the intention of destroying the realm and every Frost Giant on it.
“Thor shattered the Bifrost to stop me. I fell into the Abyss of space between the realms,” Loki said simply. He thanked the Norns for the vast amounts of practice he had as a diplomat and spy with keeping his face smooth and emotionless. The Avengers would get no more out of this than they had to.

Foster cocked her head. “What was it like?”

“Falling through space?” Loki chuckled. “Unpleasant.”

“Pick his brain about it later, Jane,” Lewis interrupted. “How did you survive the fall?”

Loki took a deep breath. “A creature of immense age and power known as Thanos guided my fall until I crash-landed on a shattered world lost to the spaces between the realms. Nowhere in Yggdrasil, nowhere any Asgardian has been before. Or since.”

“Between the realms,” Foster mused, half to herself. “Erik’s Dunne-Laro hypothesis needs to be adjusted–”

“Jane,” Dr. Banner said.

Foster mimed zipping her lips.

“How do you people get anything done?” Loki muttered, and grinned inside when all of the Avengers glared at him. He so enjoyed stirring up trouble.

“Keep talking,” Stark snapped.

Loki raised his hands. “As you will.

“I was weak from fighting Thor and from keeping myself alive in the space between the realms. Thanos is a seidr wielder as well. At full strength, he would present a challenge for me to overcome, and I had very little—you would call it magic—remaining. He broke into my mind and essentially used the influence of the scepter on me as it was on you, Agent Hill.” Loki inclined his head slightly toward Hill, fighting to hide the way he reacted to the memories. What Thanos had done—it was the scepter, but worse, because it was a conscious being sifting through every dark corner of Loki’s mind rather than inanimate power. He could imagine no greater or more intimate violation. His fists clenched beneath the table.

“However, I had an advantage in that I am a mage rather than a Midgardian, and I managed to resist. Enough to plan an invasion with little chance of success. Enough to influence the early events so as to maximize publicity and exposure in a country known for having a genocidal dictator in the last century. Enough to convince him that it was necessary for me to be captured to release the Hulk, when really I expected you to come speak with me, and I could suggest to you that all was not as it seemed. I allowed the Widow to deduce my plan, and—” He broke off and his eyes darted once to Miss Lewis.

“And what?” Rogers asked. His hands were tapping slowly on the table.

*And somehow, in the presence of Darcy Lewis, I became more aware than I was at any other point in my captivity.* “And then Miss Lewis appeared. We spoke. I attempted to do the same, then bade her conceal herself. I had enough control to leave her alive—”

“But not if I’d interfered,” Lewis said.

Loki nodded once. “I do not know what you have been told of the combat that followed, but–”
“Oh, we know what happened,” Stark growled. “Thor showed up. You guys fought. Coulson tried
to stop you and Thor killed him for his trouble. And our charming babysitter Nick Fury decided to
keep it a secret, so we had to hear it from Darcy, after Thor was long gone.”

Loki hid a smile. He would be very interested to watch the events that unfolded upon Thor’s return
to Midgard. The Avengers did not appear ready to welcome Loki’s erstwhile brother with open
arms. “In fairness to Thor, he did not intend to kill Coulson,” Loki said, mostly to see how they
would respond.

Rogers’ jaw flexed. “He still attacked a human with deadly force. Coulson was thrown across the
room with enough force to be impaled. Even without the beam, he wouldn’t have escaped without
severe injury.”

“Okay, we’ve established that no one here likes Thor. Keep talking, Reindeer Games,” Miss Lewis
said.

Loki frowned at her. “You will not refer to me as–”

“Oh, you bet your alien ass I will,” Miss Lewis interrupted, grinning. “Tony comes up with good
nicknames. Go on. Finish the story.” She propped her elbows on the table and stared at him with
wide, innocent eyes.

This woman–

Loki continued.

“Upon my escape, I was under much closer scrutiny by the Chitauri leaders,” he said. “It was all I
could do to command Selvig to build in the failsafe, and then shield his mind from the scepter
enough that the order would not be overridden.

“The invasion began. I deliberately held back the majority of the Chitauri forces to buy you time.
You had to bring Selvig out of the scepter’s influence, and then you would need the scepter itself.”

“Cognitive recalibration,” Stark said. “Selvig was thrown across the roof by the explosion when I
fired at the Tesseract. That was when he hit his head.”

“Yes, that was a brilliant plan,” Loki said sarcastically. “Try and blow up the inexhaustible energy
source. Bravo.”

Stark pointed at him. “Nobody died.”

“The whole planet could have been fried into cosmic dust in an instant,” Loki snapped.

Silence descended over the table.

“Now that you understand better with what forces you play: I made the tower my command post so
as to keep the scepter near the Tesseract, and I could only hope that one or all of you would come to
fight me. I underestimated your dedication to protecting civilians.”

“Innocent lives are important,” Rogers snapped.

Loki swirled the remaining liquor in his glass. “Indeed. And sometimes the most efficient way to
save the most lives is to eliminate the leader of the invading forces. I anticipated a tactical decision to
defeat me as a unit and therefore the army. Instead, I fought Stark and then Thor. The circumstances
allowed me to leave the scepter behind when I joined the airborne Chitauri forces, but I had to play
the part. To continue as a loyal, if coerced, general for Thanos. Which included partaking in the battle.

“I returned to the Tower eventually, and met the Hulk. You saw the results of that battle.” Loki gestured toward the dent in the floor. “Under normal circumstances, I would have immersed the Hulk in an illusion and sent it bolting away into the far north. I refrained.” He smiled thinly. “Thanos remained unaware of my full capabilities. He could not punish me for failing to use a tactic of which he had no knowledge.”

“And where have you been since then?” Hill asked.

Loki tapped the table idly. “Here and there. Midgardian authorities have been actively hunting for me all over your realm. It will take some time to discover a way off this realm—some time before I am prepared to leave. For now, I desire nothing but to wait here in peace. I have no quarrel with your people. It is taxing to maintain a shield both against Heimdall’s sight and a constant illusion complex enough to stand up to anyone I might meet. Moreover, that kind of illusory spell is far too complex to simply put on like a cape. It requires time and preparation. Avengers Tower offers a reprieve.”

“So that’s what we can give you,” Stark said. “How long do you want to stay? And what is it that you are giving us in trade?”

“The truth,” Loki said simply. “Information in exchange for a safe haven. I intend to stay… I do not know. Some years, on Midgard, I believe.”

“You’ve given us information.”

Loki smirked. Rogers had set him up perfectly. He savored the moment before he spoke. “Not all of it.”

“I thought not,” Lewis said, watching him cannily. “He’s either got something else to tell or he’s only saying that he is. If you don’t give us anything else, our bargain goes down the toilet,” she warned.

Loki drank the last of his glass. “I would expect nothing less.”

“That’s not enough,” Foster said abruptly.

All eyes turned to her, but she didn’t seem to care, examining Loki in a way that made him want to fidget or drop her gaze. “You’re going to let me run tests on you,” she said. “To study your— your seidr, or magic, or whatever you call it. If you stay.”

Loki considered. He saw no reason why allowing her to run tests while he performed simple seidr would do any harm, though his instinct was to denounce the idea as beneath him. He was the heir to two thrones, not a circus animal.

He’d learned his lesson about pride. It was a weakness when left unchecked. “Nothing invasive,” he said.

Foster whipped out a tablet of some sort and began typing on it furiously. He watched with vague interest as her attention disengaged entirely from the conversation.

“And tissue samples.”

“No,” Loki snapped instantly.
Lewis was looking at Banner with one eyebrow raised, clearly surprised that he’d spoken. The man’s words were quiet, but they held the kind of quiet force that came from someone who didn’t waste any.

“Just a bit of blood and possibly a cheek swab. I promise not to harvest your organs,” Banner said with a wry smile. Loki looked closer at the unassuming man with so much power lurking behind those even-keeled eyes. What he could do with the Hulk—cast illusions to guide the beast through any foe, any fight—

With effort, Loki cut off that thought pattern. For now.

“Hasn’t the mighty Thor already acquiesced to allow your science?” Loki snapped.

Banner shrugged. Loki remembered that he was a biologist. “It’s good science to take samples from more than one member of a given species.”

Loki instantly saw the flaw in this plan. He was Jotun. His tissue would look nothing like Thor’s. “Thor and I are twins,” he said. “We are too similar-”

Banner shook his head. “You’re fraternal twins. Your genes, if we can isolate the genetic material of Asgardian tissue, will be sufficiently different to provide useful information.”

“I refuse,” Loki said.

There was a tense pause.

“One small blood sample. Or no deal,” Stark said.

Loki glared at him.

“How much do you want to be here?” Lewis asked with a grin.

Loki’s jaw clenched. He would be forced to alter the data, sabotage the machines—anything to delay results. Or simply hope that Asgardian and Jotun biology were sufficiently different from Midgardian that they wouldn’t be able to get usable data.

“I accept,” he said coldly.

“We have to have rules,” Rogers said abruptly. “If we go forward with this. We’ll figure them out now, and if you have a problem with any, speak now or forever hold your peace.”

Lewis snorted but the rest of the team ignored her.

“JARVIS, you record this,” Stark said. “Number one: Reindeer Games doesn’t go below our private floors unless he’s disguised. Jane and Bruce, if you take him down to the labs, he’s either wearing an illusion or you clear everyone else out first. JARVIS’ll shut off the cameras if you’re taking him into an area under surveillance that anyone other than us can watch.”

“No leaving the tower unless you’re with one of us,” Rogers added.

Loki bounced his knee, once— that would be irritating, but he’d already pushed them on the tissue samples. He couldn’t risk the Avengers simply denying his bargain entirely.

“You tell us if you use any kind of magic,” Lewis said.

Stark nodded. “And you need to do something to my tower so the next extraterrestrial megalomaniac
can’t just march in here with magic and take out all my defenses.”

The rest of the Avengers stared at him while Loki tried not to laugh.

“Tony,” Rogers said tightly. “Maybe not the best use of-”

“Remind me who owns this tower?” Stark said with one eyebrow up. “Oh, yeah. Me. Watching a crazy person take it over once was one time too many. Reindeer Games here can give me an extra layer of defense. I’ll take it.”

Rogers sighed and rubbed his temple. “Fine. Loki, can you do that?”

Loki traced a rune on the table with his finger. It glowed with green energy traceries and he frowned at the way it changed and shifted for several minutes. He got what information he needed quite easily, but drew the moment out just to make them uncomfortable.

“It’s possible,” he said at last.

Rogers nodded. “And just to be sure— you are in no way to interfere with our goals; you leave us alone when we want you to; you don’t get to pass on any information you may pick up to anyone beyond this group, Natasha, and Clint; you aren’t allowed to cause or attempt to cause harm to any of us or anyone else; you follow the laws of this country while you’re here…” He trailed off, clearly running out of things to say.

“Do not concern yourself,” Loki said, amused. “I will remain unobtrusive.”

“I’m sure,” Stark said sarcastically.

Rogers looked around the table. “Anything else, guys?”

"Do we tell Maria?" Stark said.

A silence fell on the group. No one seemed to know what to say; awkward glances were exchanged as they all waited for someone else to speak.

Miss Lewis sighed loudly. "I vote no, since she's not here."

Rogers frowned. "Why not?"

"She's SHIELD," Miss Lewis said, "and also uptight, and also also hates Mr. Horny Helmet over here." Loki swallowed an irritated noise. "She might tell Fury, which we definitely aren't going to do right now, or at least she'd be conflicted about it. It's risky."

"But she's one of us," Barton argued.

"She is?" Miss Foster said.

Miss Lewis snorted.

"Vote," Rogers said.

One by one, the rest of the team shook their heads.

“Guess not,” Stark said. "Secrets, yay."

"Does anybody have with this arrangement as a whole?” Rogers asked. “Seriously. Don’t be shy.
Even with all these rules…” He trailed off, but no one needed clarification, least of all Loki, who understood perfectly well that this would be galling to Stark and Hill in particular. They both hated him.

Of course, Loki couldn’t admit that part of his motivation was simply interest. This was a very remarkable group of humans, who had managed to beat back an invasion from the depths of the universe with little external help. Their victory could be partially attributed to Fury, who had assembled the team to begin with, but–Loki was very curious to see what was in store for the Avengers.

“So we give Loki a room,” Stark said flatly. “But he has to tell us the last bit of information right now.”

“I second that,” Rogers said.

Banner nodded slowly, face pensive. Loki could tell the man was turning everything over in a very methodical fashion, processing the discussion and coming to a conclusion. Every inch the scientist. “This all seems… reasonable.”

“I have no objections to any of these restrictions,” Loki said. He’d more or less anticipated all of them, although he had hoped they wouldn’t restrict him to the tower. That was the price for a safe haven, and he would take it.

“What do we need to vote?” Rogers asked.

Stark pressed his palms flat to the counter and leaned forward to look Loki in the eyes. “I’d like to make one thing clear.”

His voice was frosty. All the others tensed slightly at his tone. Loki leaned back and gestured for him to continue.

“If you so much as step a toe outside these lines– if you break a rule, hurt any of us, interfere with our operations in any way– our deal is done. I am only agreeing to this because you’ve convinced me you’re not actively our enemy. But if you turn on us or use this olive branch as a weapon, I will come after you and you will regret that choice. Understood?”

“Understood,” Loki said. He hid his amusement, well aware that he would only find it an irritant. Stark on his own would not be capable of defeating him in battle, but he would be a formidable enemy between his mind and his suit, and he had the backing of this entire team plus SHIELD. “You will hardly even know I’m here.”

“I doubt that,” Lewis muttered.

Loki smirked at her, and she grinned.

“So we have a deal,” Rogers said, looking tired.

Stark made a face. “I need... another drink. I’m gonna regret this.” He pointed at Loki. “Don’t break my tower.”

Loki raised his hands. “ Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Awesome!” Lewis said. “Just like a dog. JARVIS, where can we keep him?”

“The Avengers have only occupied approximately two-thirds of the suites on the floor above Mr.
Stark’s,” JARVIS responded. Loki would have to ask someone, later, how that system worked. It had to be some sort of mechanized control system, but it was advanced far beyond what he had expected of Midgardian technology. “I can allocate that space to our guest.”

“Do we want him living on the same floor as us?” Banner asked.

Miss Lewis shrugged. “We can keep a closer eye on him.”

“It’ll do for now,” Rogers said. “Let’s just go with it. We can figure something else out later.” He leaned forward, just as Stark returned to the table with a new glass of the golden-brown liquor. “Spill your information.”

Loki’s face tightened. “You must keep in mind that I was not capable of accessing my normal level of mental functionality while under Thanos’ control. There are things I didn’t know—things I would normally have pursued, and uncovered, but could not because I was so overwhelmingly occupied with maintaining a shred of autonomy.” He took a breath. “As such, I can give you no names, but I know this much: Thanos has an ally here on Midgard. A very powerful, well-placed, and clever ally. Thanos’ desire to rid the Earth of humanity won’t have diminished in the slightest, and he is far from having deployed all his options. He will be delayed in his return as he no longer has my expertise in the secret shortcuts between the realms, but have no doubt, he will come. I simply do not know with whom he has allied.”

The Avengers stared at him in silence.

Chapter End Notes

Looks like this one was even longer. Oops. B)

EDIT:: A commenter called for bets. Who do we think is the secret ally???

Edit 5/25/18: I have reworked this chapter. Maria originally "discovered" Loki's presence in the tower here AND in another chapter, because i got my wires crossed. for various character reasons i preferred to keep the reveal in the other chronological place, which meant i had to fix this chapter. it's been fixed and maria edited out of this scene. it's been months since i finished this thing (thank user Andraste that i fixed it at all) and if Maria interacts with Loki or is aware of his presence in the following chapters, i'm sorry but i haven't got the time to edit them right now.
Chapter 48

Avengers Tower, New York, United States

June 2011

Steve slowly unwrapped his knee, muscles aching.

Six punishing hours in Tony’s exercise rooms was enough to make even a supersoldier’s body feel the work, and his knee had been bothering him ever since that time he got tossed by an explosion in ‘44 and landed wrong. Tony had showed him some modern physical therapy tricks and braces that helped, but it still twinged now and then.

He walked into the bathrooms, undressed, and turned the water up as hot as it would go.

Forehead pressed to the tiles, Steve shut his eyes and let the almost-unbearably-hot water pound down his shoulders and back and legs, washing away the memories of the crash. It grounded him in the present, reminded him that he wasn’t trapped anymore. He was free of the ice.

The cold still lurked under his skin sometimes.

When the hot water began to run out, he sighed and shut off the faucet and went through the motions of putting himself back together.


He moved on to the checklist of things for the day. There were reports of Chitauri tech circulating on the black market in Chicago; he was scheduled to meet with Darcy, Tony, and Maria about it in an hour (apparently Darcy knew some people who “engaged in activities of questionable legality”, as she put it) to discuss the problem and whether it warranted the Avengers’ interference or if SHIELD and the cops could handle the problem. He also had to corral Bruce and ask him if he’d made any progress talking to Tony about his PTSD. So far, every attempt had been met with evasion and scorn, but Bruce said he thought he was making progress. Steve just hoped they’d make Tony admit he needed help before he had a flashback in the middle of a firefight and got himself killed. (Steve knew all about flashbacks, but he wasn’t grief-stricken and plagued by a chronic lack of impulse control.) There was Loki to deal with—he’d been sitting in his room for a week and emerged only to get food at all kinds of odd hours, but Steve didn’t trust the guy an inch; he had to talk to JARVIS about the surveillance and what exactly Loki had been doing. And he had to contact Fury directly about Clint and Natasha’s whereabouts. It had been a week since they’d seen Clint and a lot longer than that since Natasha dropped off the grid. Both of them would be invaluable in any investigation of black-market Chitauri weapons. And Steve had to admit… he missed them.

Steve felt the foul mood he’d been trying to beat out of himself with a workout returning full-force. It suddenly pissed him off that he’d managed to find people who accepted him (broken dark pieces and all), people with whom he could make a difference and who didn’t try to make him follow orders, and here was Fury trying to interfere.

Maria caught up to him right as he left the gymnasium. “Steve,” she said quietly, “I’ve got news.”

“The Chitauri tech?” Steve said. “Darcy said she heard something-”

Maria shook her head and fell into step beside him. They headed for the stairs in silent agreement, the ingrained aversion to being trapped in a small space that could drop you eighty-plus floors if
sabotaged. “Different subject. You’re not going to like it.”

“Of course not,” Steve muttered. “Shoot.”

“I’ve been recalled, effective today. Fury’s decided the crisis is over and he needs me back at his side. He’s going to be here in five minutes, he has Clint with him, and we haven’t told either of them about Loki yet.”

“Five minutes?” Steve repeated. “Why didn’t he warn us?”

“Best guess? He’s trying to catch us doing something off the books,” Maria said.

“Like harboring an offworld criminal,” Steve said grimly.

“Exactly.”

They broke into a sprint up the stairs.

When the two of them burst into the penthouse floor, or “common room” as the unholy duo of Darcy and Tony had taken to calling it, Steve stopped short. There was Darcy herself, leaning up against the counter with Loki.

“What are you doing?” Steve snapped, striding forward.

Darcy raised an eyebrow. “Is he not allowed to learn how to use the coffeemaker?”

Loki bowed slightly, that insufferable smirk on his face. It never seemed to go away, like he was always internally mocking everyone around him. Bastard. Steve scowled at him.

“He’s bad enough without caffeine,” he growled. “Loki, out. Fury’s gonna be here in four minutes and he can’t know you’re here.”

Darcy shot Loki a look. “Is it possible—”

“We made a list, remember?” Maria said. “Yes, Fury is one of seventy-four potential candidates for Thanos’ secret ally.”

Steve winced. He knew it was a possibility, but he couldn’t bring himself to really believe it of Fury. Tony, on the other hand, adamantly maintained that it could very easily be the director of SHIELD, and it had sparked eight arguments that went in circles for hours in the week since Loki’s little truth-bomb.

“We’re not having this discussion again,” Steve said. “Not only do we have no new information that would change the outcome, but we really don’t have time. Loki. Out.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Loki said sarcastically, and accepted the coffee mug from Darcy before he turned and strode out of the room.

“So Fury’s about to show up. Anything else I should know?” Darcy said.

“I’ve been recalled,” Maria said.

“What?”

Steve left Maria to explain and jogged over to the window. No helicopter in sight. “JARVIS, can you send Jane and Bruce up here, please?”
“They are engaged in a sensitive experiment,” JARVIS said. “It would be unwise to disturb them.”

“Fine. What about Tony?”

“I shall notify him that he is needed in the penthouse.”

A faint sound of chopper blades reached Steve’s ears. “Thanks.”

Tony slammed through the doors a second later holding a weapon.

Darcy stared at him. “Is that a paintball gun?”

“I’m going to make a Jackson Pollock imitation on Fury’s duster,” Tony replied, a sentence that made no sense to Steve. “How much less intimidating do you think he’ll look spattered in pink and white?”

“Uhhhh… forty percent?” Darcy said.

“That was a rhetorical question.”

“That was before it met me.”

Steve pressed his fingers to his temple. “Can you please not? Tony, put the paintball gun away. And no one is to say a word about Loki, his news, or the fact that Fury lied to us about Coulson’s death. We don’t know enough right now.”

“Yet,” Darcy muttered, and flopped onto a couch. She whipped out her phone. “Hide the paintball gun, Tony, we can do splatter paint later.”

Tony tried to jam the gun beneath the sink. It didn’t fit.

“Chopper’s almost here,” Steve warned.

“Fridge!” Darcy called.

Tony hauled open the fridge, shoved a sack of broccoli and three cartons of chocolate milk aside, and stuck the paintball gun inside, upright. It fit. Barely. He closed the door and grinned at Darcy. “I knew there was a reason I like you.”

Steve squinted across the room. “Are you drunk?”

“Buzzed,” Tony said. “Helps me think. I’m running a hack on SHIELD. It’s not easy. They’ve got a hell of a lot of secrets to protect.”

“You’re what?” Steve snapped.

The helicopter sound increased to a roar as it swung around the side of the building across the street and came in for a landing.

“Save it,” Maria said. “Here we go.”

Hacking SHIELD. Steve felt the beginnings of a headache pounding at the back of his skull. The universe was determined to make his life unpleasant today.

“Can we just sit down and deal with one thing at a time? No paintballs and no hacking and no Loki for the moment?”
“Yes, sir,” Tony said caustically, and sat down across from Darcy.

Steve really wished he could still get drunk.

He felt it when the helicopter touched down and turned around to watch out the big bay windows, the familiar churn of anger starting up again in his gut when Fury’s bald head appeared in the helicopter door, a cardboard box tucked under his arm.

Then Clint stepped out behind him.

“Hey, it’s the Hawk!” Darcy said happily, then paused. “Wait. He looks upset. And Fury’s pissed.”

“This should be good,” said Tony darkly.

Steve wanted to sit down. The soldier in him kept him on his feet, hands clasped in front of him, ready to greet a commanding officer even though he wasn’t technically at attention.

Fury shoved through the doors with his usual force and dropped the box on the floor. “Oh, look, you’re all here,” he said. “I’ve got news, and you’re not gonna like it.”

“We should patent that phrase,” Tony said.

“Be quiet,” Fury snapped. “Where are Drs. Foster and Banner?”

“Sciencing,” Darcy said. “Something finicky. They don’t want to be disturbed.”

“Well, disturb them.”

Darcy looked down at her phone. “Nah.”

Fury paused. “Excuse me?”

“Last time I checked, I’m employed by Tony,” Darcy said. “And he’s not employed by you. So I don’t follow your orders.”

“Hill, Barton, get the scientists up here,” Fury growled.

“They’re under my employ,” Tony said. “And this is my property. They’re busy. Agents Hill and Barton get to stay here.”

Fury scowled harder and looked around the room. Steve made sure the man found no compromise in his face when Fury’s eye fell on him.

“Didn’t your mom tell you if you make that face too often, it’ll get stuck like that?” Tony asked him with mock concern.

“Too late,” Darcy stage whispered.

“Okay, enough, you two,” Steve said tiredly. “Fury. What’s the news?”

Fury slapped a flash drive down on the conference table, which hummed as the files were dumped into its system. The glass top doubled as one of Tony’s screens, and it shimmered and pulled up high-definition pictures of a massacre.

“Fun times,” Darcy commented from the sofa.
“That’s the news,” Fury snapped. “Natasha Romanoff went off the grid weeks ago. We’ve been trying to track her, always a step behind. Agent Barton here disregarded his orders and went after her himself. He uncovered her trail but lost her after this.” He paused. “What do you know about the Winter Soldier?”
“Uh… remember that most of the people in this room aren’t privy to your kind of clearance,” Tony said. Yet. He’d get into SHIELD’s files eventually. “So that would be ‘nothing’.”

Fury glared at him. Tony took a drink and gave the man a scornful look because he knew his disdain would piss Fury off, and it worked wonderfully. The scowl lines deepened, but Fury didn’t rise to the bait. “The Winter Soldier,” he said, “is an extremely dangerous operative first utilised by the KGB in approximately 1947. We know next to nothing about him. He’s a ghost. He’s cropped up dozens if not hundreds of times around the globe in the last sixty-four years, but only as whispers, and by the time we arrive, he’s long gone. We don’t know who he is, where he comes from, what they’ve done to him, or even whether it’s only one person.” He paused. “Until now.”

“You think he did this?” Steve said, moving toward the table. Tony felt the edges of a flashback pulsing around his thoughts and kept his eyes well clear. “Was there surveillance?”

“Cameras all over the hotel. Armed security, undercover bodyguards in the party, motorcades, you name it,” Fury said. “He got around all of it without a hitch. This gathering is comprised of extremely highly-placed officials from Russia, China, Ukraine, Turkey, Poland, and Greece. All of them were attending a party held in the hotel pictured.” Fury tapped one of the photos, and Tony chanced a look: a well-lit building modern building with a sign in Russian characters. “It seems they were having some kind of covert meeting. We don’t know what they were discussing and haven’t had a chance to investigate- my Russian counterparts aren’t too big on sharing. I’m told they don’t like me much.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Steve muttered.

Tony turned around. “I’m sorry, did I mishear you or did you just sass back at your CO?”

“He’s not my CO,” Steve said quietly. “Continue, sir.”

Fury looked like he was about to have a conniption. Clint, conversely, appeared to be having a fantastic time watching all this, but Tony wondered why he’d been so uncharacteristically quiet.

“What do we know?” Maria asked, all business.

Fury tapped another file. “We have basic autopsies. They match what my people saw before they were kicked out. About half these men died of wounds characteristic of our Soldier: a person of immense strength, over six feet tall judging by the angles of some wounds, who favors his left arm. The real giveaway, though, was this.” He magnified a video feed. Faint pops of silenced gunfire emanated from the table’s speakers. Tony clenched his fist around his glass of Scotch. “We caught one glimpse of our guy on the way in.”

A man in a suit appeared, face hidden expertly from the camera, and dove for the door.

Fury paused the video right as the man’s fingers closed on the handle. “Look.” He magnified it, and
the group shuffled in closer.

“Tattoo,” said Maria, and Tony nodded.

It was a faded red star-shaped tattoo on the back of the man’s neck, almost hidden by his hairline. They could only see it because his hair was pulled back into a ponytail.

“That tattoo’s been reported in several sightings of this Winter Soldier over the years,” Fury said. “It’s one of only three things we consider true about him: he’s male, he’s marked by that tattoo… and it’s very likely that he’s been modified much as Captain Rogers and Agent Romanoff were.”

“So you do think it’s the same person,” Maria said. “The KGB managed to make one of their own.”

“Possibly more than one, but I do believe that there is one man who has been running missions for the Russians since the outset of the Cold War,” Fury said. “Agent Barton, tell them what you found.”

“An old bunker, a while north of Moscow,” Clint said. “You don’t want to know what I had to do to find the place. Thirty-eight people inside, dead–soldiers and scientist-looking types. The weirdest bit was what looked like a massive industrial freezer, half-melted, with people-sized cryotubes. One of them was in use until very recently.

“I was able to get into the servers, but since I’m not a computer person, I accidentally tripped some kind of autovirus. I did get a few fragments of video and enough information to strongly suggest that our target, the Winter Soldier, was there in cryo for at least a decade, probably longer. Someone showed up, sterilized the place, and defrosted him.”

“Agent Barton,” Fury said, voice like stone, “tell them why you went there in the first place.”

Clint hesitated. Tony’s finely tuned sense of bodily cues sat up and perked its ears. That was—anguish on the SHIELD agent’s face.

“You were looking for Natasha,” Darcy said.

Clint’s eyes flicked to her. “Yes.”

“Agent Romanoff dropped off the grid after her last mission,” Fury said. “Disobeyed orders and gave her watchers the slip. She’s highly skilled; we couldn’t track her.”

“But I could,” Clint said.

“Agent Barton went off the reservation as well, but given that he was successful and returned to us with valuable intel, he’s only on probation,” Fury said. “Agent Romanoff’s in a tougher position. The other half of the men in that room?” He shook his head. “They were killed with knives to the throat or heart, impossibly precise blows indicative of a fighting style that I’ve only seen used by three people with any degree of skill. Two of those people are dead now. Entrance wound angles suggest someone significantly shorter than most special operatives, a population subset comprised overwhelmingly of men.”

“Natasha was there,” Darcy summarized.

Fury pressed play on the video.

Muzzle flashes, bullets, and the sounds of dying men poured out of the room for less than thirty seconds, but it was enough to start a dull roar in Tony’s ears. He gripped the edge of the table, hyperaware of the way it drew Steve, Darcy, and Clint’s attention to him.
Two people slipped out of the room, heads turned expertly away from the camera, but even before Fury hit pause Tony knew he recognized that head of red hair.

“Natasha Romanoff is considered a rogue agent, armed, fugitive from the United States, and highly dangerous,” Fury said. Each word fell to the table like a chunk of ice. “She’s aiding and abetting a criminal, mass murderer, and wanted man who’s been MIA for twenty-five years but is quite possibly the most dangerous single person on the planet.”

That’s what you think, Tony thought at Fury, picturing Loki as he’d been that morning: impossibly tall and imposing when he came in for food, far healthier than he had been during the battle of New York. And then there was Natasha herself, and Darcy, who could be very dangerous in a very different way. And Bruce, of course. Though Steve was exempt— the golden retriever made human had too strong a moral compass to be as frightening as the Winter Soldier.

The point remained that Fury was dramatically underestimating the Avengers.

Tony almost smiled.

Almost.

Fury tapped the table and the files vanished. He plucked the flash drive off the glass and dropped it back in his pocket. “Effective immediately, Natasha Romanoff is at the top of my ‘wanted’ list, second only to the Winter Soldier himself. The people in this room are the only people we know her to have any concrete ties with.” He pointed at the cardboard box. “She left that for you. We’ve been scanning it for any trace of bugs or messages, and come up with zilch, so you can have the contents now. If Agent Romanoff contacts any of you, if you so much as catch a glimpse of her on the street, I want to know yesterday. If I find out you’ve been in touch with her and didn’t tell me, I’ll have you up on charges of treason so fast you’ll get whiplash. The Tower is under surveillance beginning right now. Consider this a courtesy warning.” He looked around the table, face uncompromising. Tony wanted to argue but he suspected that if he opened his mouth, the only that would come out would be gibberish. “Effective immediately, Agents Barton and Hill are coming with me.”

“I quit,” Clint said quietly.

Fury froze. “What did you just say?”

“I said I quit. Sir.” Clint stood tall and faced the Director, eyes hard. “I’ve already tried to convince you that it’s a mistake to chase Tasha. She’s gone already, and if you go after her like this, you’re only gonna make it worse. I’m not going to participate in a manhunt against my oldest friend.”

“You signed a contract,” Fury hissed.

This, Tony could do. He released the table and stepped forward. “Barton’s contract expired two years ago.”

Every eye in the room snapped to him. Normally the center of attention was exactly where Tony wanted to be, but right now it only made him nauseous. He ignored the twist of his stomach. “The only remaining restrictions on the termination of Agent Barton’s employment are the Statute of Secrecy, and the clause requiring him to move into either retirement or work for an employer who has a Level Six or higher SHIELD security clearance, keeps Barton in SHIELD’s line of jurisdiction, and has a history of cooperation with SHIELD. Stark Industries meets all those characteristics. I’ve been looking for a bodyguard, and Barton here’s been kind enough to accept.”

Fury’s face was twisted with anger, but he didn’t say a word for at least thirty seconds. Tony leashed
the storm inside his skin. The best part was that Fury couldn’t even come after Tony for knowing that information; the legal documents were part of Clint’s file, which had been released to Tony as part of the Avengers Initiative.


He stalked toward the doors.

“Maria,” Darcy hissed, and tossed the other woman something small and black. Maria caught it in one hand, glanced down, and dropped it in her pocket. She nodded once at the group and then left without a backward glance.

“Well, that was dramatic,” Tony remarked.

The helicopter took off.

Steve looked at Darcy as it swung out of sight. “What’d you give her?” he asked.

Darcy grinned. “Burner phone. It’s got my spare number in it. She can contact us if she wants.”

“Spare number?” Clint asked.

“I have a second phone registered under the name Lizzie Moore,” Darcy said, a shadow crossing her face for a brief moment. “Working for the feds makes you a little paranoid. Looks like it paid off.”

“You are certainly an entertaining group of people to live with,” Loki remarked from the stairs.

Clint turned around. “The fu–what the fuck is he doing here?” he demanded.

Steve looked at Darcy, clearly at the end of his metaphorical rope. “You get to explain. Since you dragged the stray inside.”

“I am not a stray,” Loki said, sounding affronted.

“No, you’re a mass murderer standing in my penthouse!” Clint snapped.

Attention flicked to Tony. He realized they were all waiting for him to make some comment about it being his penthouse.

Tony looked down at the table. “I need…” he said, and collapsed.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone! Sorry about the late update. School's crazy right now, and I've been a bit ill for the last week. I should be back on my usual schedule now, though.

I've never written a character with PTSD before. I've done some research about symptoms and how it manifests in different people, but I still don't feel entirely confident with my ability to write Tony convincingly here. If anyone has experience with PTSD or knows more about it or anything, I'd love feedback!
Chapter 50

Avengers Tower

June 2011

Clint wasn’t sure where to look.

Tony was on the floor. Darcy had a hand over her mouth. Steve was lunging in slow motion for Tony on the floor. And Loki, of all the fucking people, was standing at the bottom of the stairwell.

“Tony,” Steve said.

Clint made up his mind and knelt on Tony’s other side. “Grab his legs,” he said.

Steve helped Clint lift Tony onto the couch. Loki meandered over and watched with clinical detachment. Tony’s eyes were open, blank, pupils massively dilated, jittering from one thing to another. Things that weren’t really there. It was one of the creepiest things Clint had ever seen.

“Here,” Darcy said, and splashed water on Tony’s face.

He sputtered and choked and blinked several times. Gradually, his pupils shrank to a normal size and came to rest on Steve’s face, then Clint’s.

“Did I pass out?” he asked.

“Puppet. Strings.” Darcy made a scissoring motion to punctuate the statement.

“Damn, I didn’t think I was that drunk…” Tony tried a laugh and struggled to sit up. The laugh sounded distinctly fake.


“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tony snarled, and shoved back against Steve.

Steve resisted.

Tony socked him in the jaw.

Clint recognized the signs of raw animal fear: eyes wide, labored breathing, desperation to escape a trap, to get away, hide, protect oneself. Problem was that Tony’s trust issues ran so deep, he considered other people threats.

“Back off,” Clint said, and pushed Steve away. “You’re not helping.”

Steve glared at Clint for three seconds, before he jerked to his feet and marched out of the room.

“JARVIS, call Bruce up here, and tell him to talk to Tony. Right now.” Clint poked Tony hard in the shoulder. “You’re going to be honest, get over your pride, and trust him. The rest of us are going to go over by the kitchenette, I’m going to make coffee, and someone is going to explain why Loki is in Avengers Tower. Okay?”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Darcy said, grinning, and patted Tony on the head. “We’re here for ya, bro.”
Clint noticed a lot of things, always. It was his gift and his curse. He noticed that Tony was trembling very faintly, and that the bottles along Tony’s minibar were a lot emptier than they had been on Clint’s last visit, and that someone had added an extra seat to the table. But what he mostly noticed in that moment was the way Darcy added a bit of a swing to her hips on her way over to the kitchen area, and that Loki’s eyes tracked her all the way across the room.

How interesting.

Clint glared at Loki, waited until the Asgardian began walking over to Darcy, and followed closely behind.

“Okay,” he said when they congregated. “Someone start talking.”
“Are you going to listen this time, or is it just going to be the same routine evasions as the last five times I tried this?” Bruce asked.

Tony groaned and threw an arm over his face. “Bruce-”

“No. Listen.” Bruce didn’t like getting snappish, but this day had been hellish and he was so done with Tony’s shit. “You have been in denial about the fact that you have PTSD. Among a host of other issues, but that’s the most problematic one at the moment.”

“I’m not in denial,” Tony growled. “It’s my problem. I’ll deal with it.”

“Until you have a flashback in the middle of a firefight and get Steve killed,” Bruce countered.

Tony opened his mouth. No words came out.

“Or Clint. Or Darcy. Or Jane. Or Maria. Or the civilians that you’re trying to protect. Do you get what I’m saying? It’s not just your problem when you are not the only one to’s impacted by it,” Bruce snapped. “PTSD is nothing to be ashamed of. It does not make you weak. We are not going to use it against you because we are your team now, but you don’t get to just pretend that this doesn’t affect us too.”

Tony grumbled something inaudible.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Bruce asked.


“Not therapy,” Bruce said. “You’d just give the therapist a drinking problem. But there are support groups for vets and people with PTSD from battle scenarios. I’m sure we could find a spot for you in one of them.” He hesitated. “Steve might even go with you.”


“Tony,” Bruce said tiredly. “This is because of your dad, isn’t it?” He remembered what Clint and Steve had talked to him about. “I know you don’t want to show weakness, or whatever, in front of your childhood hero. But–do you really think our Steve Rogers is the same man your father knew?”

Tony blinked twice. “I–”

“He’s not,” Bruce said bluntly. “He told us as much. Steve Rogers is somebody new. Captain America’s gone. You’re not asking for this help from a hero. You’re asking for it from a friend.”
Short chapter, I know. Sorry :( I'm going to update tomorrow instead of Saturday to make up for it.
Chapter 52

Avengers Tower

June 2011

Tony was the first one to speak. “We have a decis-”

“Are we doing the formal meeting thing again?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, did the middle of my sentence interrupt the beginning of yours?”

“Ouch, it bites,” Darcy said apathetically. “Are we? Because I seem to remember some arguments last time, so if we’re having a repeat performance, I need coffee first.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Yes, get coffee, we need you more hyperactive than you already are.”

“I can make coffee,” Loki announced.

Almost as one, the Avengers turned to stare at him. Darcy was the exception; she liked watching her teammates’ expressions. Most of them appeared to have not noticed that Loki was in the room.

So far, he had remained unobtrusive as promised, hiding in his room most of every day. Darcy grinned. This meeting just got a lot more interesting.

“Are you going to poison it?” Steve asked.


“You didn’t answer the question,” Darcy countered.

Loki’s eyes flicked to her. “No, I’m not going to poison it.”

“Awesome. I like it black.” Darcy turned back to the team. “Okay, what’s the problem?”

“I can’t get these calculations to work out,” Jane said absently. She had four file folders on the table, and one of them was full of paper scraps, some of which Darcy remembered collecting around Jane’s lab last week so they wouldn’t get lost. “The value should be negative, but it’s coming out positive and way too high besides--”

“Jane, could we maybe wait and do that later? Please?” Darcy asked.

Jane blinked the science fugue from her eyes. “Uh. Yeah. Sorry.” She glanced around the table, at Clint, Steve, Tony, and Bruce. “What were we talking about?”

“Nothing yet because people keep interrupting me,” Tony said irritably.

Darcy was reminded forcefully that Tony’s emotional control was tenuous at best. “My bad,” she said, and leaned forward, the picture of the attentive student. It was a behavioral pattern she’d perfected in college. Her professors loved her. “What did you need to say?”

“You’re all ridiculous,” Clint said.

“Says the man who fights aliens with a bow and arrows,” Tony countered.
Steve finally lifted his head and stepped in. “What Tony’s been trying to say is that we have a decision to make.”

Instantly, Tony and Clint settled, and Darcy felt herself automatically shifting into focused mode, reacting to Steve’s unspoken command to get themselves in line. It annoyed her slightly that he could exert that much force over her, but then she decided that it was a mark of leadership. They were a team. It was a good thing.

She’d just have to maintain her autonomy in the process.

“Bruce and Jane, have you been filled in on Fury’s visit yesterday?” Steve asked.

“JARVIS played us the security feed,” Bruce said. “Quite a performance. What was in the box?”

“Well, that’s part of it,” Steve said, and plunked the box on the table. “We need to open this.”

“I can’t believe Fury kept it from us this whole time,” Clint said. “It’s been, what, a month?”

“I don’t find it difficult to believe at all,” Bruce said.

Clint tapped compulsively at the table.

Steve pulled a four-inch fixed-blade knife out of his pocket and drew it down the taped top of the box. When the packing tape gave, the flaps popped open, revealing an odd jumble of objects, each marked with a Post-It or tag of some kind.

Steve pulled out the top one: a baseball cap. He looked at the front, snorted, and turned it so the rest of the group could see.

`WWII Veteran`, it read.

Clint, Tony, and Darcy laughed a bit. “So she’s been hiding a sense of humor in there,” Tony remarked.

“Tasha has a great sense of humor,” Clint said, and pulled something oddly-shaped out of the box. It took Darcy a second to process the fact that she was seeing it correctly and he was, in fact, holding a rubber pigeon.

“Why did she send you a rubber pigeon?” Tony asked.

“Inside joke,” Clint said.

“You’ll be telling that story sometime,” Darcy threatened.

Clint raised an eyebrow at her.

Steve pulled out a brown expandable paper folder with a closing flap, the same kind you could buy for five bucks at any grocery store. It was stained with what looked suspiciously like blood. “This is labeled… for Jane,” he said, puzzled, and slid it down the table.

Jane unwrapped the string tying it shut. Darcy recognized hesitation in her friend and made sure to smile when Jane glanced at her. It was part of their unconscious language.

Inside was a three-inch-thick sheaf of paper, battered and stained with watermarks and creases.

Jane’s brow furrowed when she read the top page. Confusion slowly turned to amazement as she
“This is… This is a copy of the Bauer-Leyman hypothesis,” she said. “But that’s… not possible. They lost everything in the hurricane four years ago–oh my god, there’s data. They did experiments! This is–where did she get this?’”

“I don’t think you want to know,” Clint said, grinning. “But she took the time to get it for you.”

“No thanks,” Jane said absently. She turned to the second page. Darcy could tell she’d be lost for the next several hours in her world of physics and calculus and who-knew-what-else.

“I–oh, this is for Maria,” Steve said, and showed them a clutch, larger than usual but still classy and beautiful. Darcy’s fingers itched. She wanted one.

Steve fumbled around with the clasp, trying to get it open.

“Let me,” Tony said irritately, and grabbed the accessory. He got it open on the first try and tossed it back.

“Pepper has–had–one like it,” he said, looking down, when Steve and Clint both squinted at him.

Steve nodded slowly and angled the clutch, then snorted.

“What?” Darcy asked.

In response, he turned it so the rest of them could see inside. Darcy laughed when she realized why it was larger than many fashion accessories of its kind: there was a small gun of some kind built into a custom holster on the inside.

“We can send it to her later,” Steve said. The mood at the table soured slightly at the reminder that Maria was gone.

He set it aside and pulled out a book and two items of clothing.

“Tony, Bruce, and… Lewis,” he read, and passed them out.

Bruce shook out a massive pair of stretchy, bright red pants, and started laughing helplessly.

“You’d look like a really buff Christmas tree,” Darcy said.

A cup of coffee landed on the table in front of her.

She blinked and glanced up. She’d almost forgotten that Loki was in the corner, battling the coffeemaker.

“Uh. Thanks,” she said, and wrapped her hands hesitantly around the mug.

“You are most welcome,” Loki said, and folded himself into a seat near the foot of the table.

“Ignore him,” Darcy said, and turned back to the rest of the team. She deliberately ignored her ‘gift’. In her experience, gifts weren’t pleasant things unless they came from Jane. “Tony, what’s yours?”

Tony shook out a shirt, read the front, and grinned.

Darcy suddenly realized it was the first time she’d seen him smile since Pepper died.
“Show us?” Bruce asked.

Tony spun the shirt around. On the front, in white letters, it said, *I flew through a portal into outer space and all I got was this T-shirt*. In smaller letters below, it finished *(and a few broken bones)*.

“Darce, what’s yours?” Clint asked.

Darcy readied herself to control her reaction. If it was a gag gift, if something popped out at her–

“No way,” she said, and flipped the book open.

“Spill,” Tony said.

“You are possibly the least patient person I’ve ever met,” Darcy muttered.

He kicked at her chair beneath the table. “And you’re just noticing that now?”

“No, I knew that ages ago, but I thought it was worth saying,” Darcy retorted. “It’s a translation of a first manuscript of Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, with his own notations and research sources and context. This is… I didn’t even know this existed.”

“It’s probably stolen,” Clint said.

Steve shifted in his seat. “If it’s stolen, then-”

“No, I’m keeping it,” Darcy said. “I don’t wanna know where this come from, but it’s mine now.”

“You’re all horrible,” Steve said.

“What, nothing for me?” Loki mused.

Darcy counted *one, two, three* seconds of awkward silence. “She doesn’t know you’re here,” she pointed out. “Don’t get your pride in a twist.”

Loki’s brows furrowed.

Darcy really wished he weren’t so hot. “Uh–Steve, what were you saying about a decision?”

“Well, it has to do with Natasha, kind of,” Steve said quietly. “I’m speaking in regards to Fury.”

“I’m done taking his orders,” Tony said.

“I thought we already decided that?” Bruce asked.

Tony shook his head. “No. I’m done working with him, done with SHIELD. He’s lied to us enough, and now this with Romanoff?”

“I agree,” Steve said.

*That* caught Darcy’s attention. “The golden boy wants to go rogue?”

“I’m not the poster child they dressed me up as,” Steve snapped back. “Natasha’s our–teammate. She’s saved my life, and I’ve saved hers, and that’s not a bond I break as easily as Fury seems to.”

“To be fair, we’re already going behind Fury’s back in a big way,” Bruce pointed out, and tilted his head towards Loki.
Loki looked up from his hands. “Hmm?”

“Never mind,” Darcy said, and flapped her fingers at him. “Good point, Bruce. But we shouldn’t tell Fury this, or make it clear just yet that we’re our own—what, vigilante squad? That sounds weird—”

“Why wouldn’t we have a conversation with him about it?” Steve asked.

“Dear lord, you don’t have a deceitful bone in your body, do you?” Darcy said. “Because we have the advantage if he doesn’t know. If we keep pretending to cooperate with him on the science part—Jane and Bruce and Tony still have the scepter, and Bruce just got a request to weigh in on examinations of Chitauri tissue—then we can request SHIELD intel when we have missions and we’re validated by SHIELD in the eyes of the news. We’re heroes for now, but give it time and they’ll find a way to spin us in a negative light. Always happens. It’s already started, a bit, but the movement hasn’t gained a whole lot of traction yet. When it does, we’ll need the validation of a government agency, but we also can’t look too closely related to SHIELD, or people won’t trust us. Plus this way we don’t lose contact with Maria.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Couldn’t have put it better myself,” Tony said at last. “I’m with Darcy.”

Bruce looked at the head of the table. “Steve…”

“I suppose… you make a strong case,” Steve said. He frowned at the table, doodling on a napkin. Darcy craned her head to see what he was drawing. A dancing monkey? He looked at the pencil sketch for several seconds, then lifted his chin decisively. “Yes. We do as Darcy says.”

“I’m willing,” Bruce said. “But I should get back to the lab.”

“I’m coming,” Tony said. “And let’s bring Jane.”

“Nuh uh, you’re coming with me,” Steve said, and latched onto Tony’s arm. “Remember?”

Tony stared at Steve and then a light came on in his eyes. “Right. Uh—” Uncertainty clouded his face, to Darcy’s surprise. “Should I change?”

Steve scanned Tony’s dark blue button-down and khaki slacks. “No, you’re fine. Let’s go.”

“Me, too,” Clint said.

Tony gave him a Look.

“Hey, I’m your bodyguard now, remember?” Clint said, grinning.

“I’m regretting that decision,” Tony muttered, but he didn’t say no.

Darcy watched them crowd into the elevator with Bruce and Jane, whose nose was still buried in the scientific papers.

Then she realized they were leaving her alone with Loki. She was abruptly aware of the keen way he was watching her but pretending not to.

She lifted the coffee mug and took a slow sip. Her taste buds revolted at the first touch of liquid: he’d dumped at least a tablespoon of salt in there.

Darcy turned around and met Loki’s eyes.
He smirked.

She drank the entire mug of coffee in one go and set the mug down without breaking eye contact or letting her expression change in the slightest.

His smirk slipped.

Darcy grinned. “Thanks for the coffee,” she said, a bit of a purr in her voice, and took the mug over to the kitchen.

The noise of the sink as she rinsed out the cup drowned out Darcy’s awareness of Loki, but she refused to turn around and watch him. Not only was that creepy, but it felt too much like a concession.

She set the mug on the dish rack to dry, started the coffee maker, and palmed a small plastic bottle off the counter. Darcy turned around–

And stopped short. Loki was standing right there, inches away. And damn, he was tall.

Darcy leaned back against the edge of the sink to maximize the space between them. She tried to pass it off as casual but suspected that she failed.

“Clearly there is no concept of personal space on Asgard,” she remarked.

Loki cocked his head in a way that was distinctly not human. “You are quite something, Darcy Lewis.”

“I’m definitely not nothing,” she countered.

He smiled like a knife’s edge. “There are few people of any realm who would be so willing as you have been to forgive my role in an invasion of one’s homeworld.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Darcy said. “There’s nothing to forgive.”

“That attitude is precisely my point,” he said.

Darcy was hyperaware of the space between them. She was torn between the urge to step forward until it was gone, or shove him away until he was out of the way.

She deliberately uncrossed her arms, a gesture of trust, and let her arms fall to her sides. She was Darcy Lewis, not some awkward college freshman.

“It doesn’t mean I like you,” she said. “It means I’m logical. It means I reserve judgment about people until I know them.”

“And what have you decided about me?” Loki pressed closer.

Darcy lifted her chin. “Jury’s out.”

“I look forward to the ruling,” Loki said, and stepped away.

Tension Darcy hadn’t acknowledged bled out of her muscles.

She expected Loki to leave, but he simply backed away and leaned against the fridge.

“You want something,” Darcy said at last.
“What makes you think that?”

“What else would you stay?” she countered.

“Perhaps I am enjoying the view.”

“You’re looking at me, not the window.”

His lips curled. “Precisely.”

“I look like a hobo right now,” Darcy said flatly. She was wearing yoga pants and a hoodie but no makeup, and her hair was up in a messy bun. “View’s not that spectacular.”

“And you’re curious,” Loki said. “Else you’d be gone as well.”

*He’s clever.* Darcy smirked. “Maybe I’m waiting to make another mug of coffee,” she said.

“The coffeepot is not active.”

“Exactly.”

“You don’t trust me near your coffee,” Loki concluded.

“Why would I?”

“Why would you not?”

*Question game.* Darcy straightened at the distinct challenge in his voice. She was good at this. She and Lizzie had played it for hours to entertain themselves.

“Why do you have to ask?” she said.

“Why do you want to know?”

“Why do you assume that I want to know anything?”

“What makes you think I assume at all?”

*No non sequiturs, Darce.* “What are you driving at?”

Loki’s eyes were blazing green, elated, alive. Darcy wanted–

“Why are you here?” he asked.

“Why haven’t you left?”

“What’s holding you here?” he pressed. Darcy’s skin prickled. There was something more going on here than a simple game of wits.

“What’s holding you here?”

“Where else would I go?” Loki asked bleakly.

Darcy knew she had an answer.

She filled two mugs with black coffee and a dash of sweetener, aware of Loki’s eyes on her as she did so, and handed him one of them when she finished.
“Do you think I want you to leave?” she asked.

Loki smiled and accepted the coffee.

Two seconds later, he sputtered. “What-”

Darcy doubled over laughing.

Loki examined the mug closely. “What did you put in here?”

“What are you talking about?” Darcy said with an innocent smile, and sipped her own (perfect) coffee. All that sleight of hand at college parties had paid off. Even with Loki watching, she’d been able to pour soy sauce from last night’s sushi into his drink. She felt the empty plastic bottle against her arm, inside her sleeve.

“Would you care to taste my coffee?” he said with a grin.

Darcy returned it. “Would you care to tell me what you did to mine earlier?”

Loki raised the mug of tainted coffee in a toast and drank the whole thing down while Darcy snickered.

“How well versed are you in Midgardian literature?”

Darcy blinked and thought about it, even though she didn’t intend to answer. (That would be giving up, and she was way too stubborn to fold so easily.) Well enough, she guessed.

“Wouldn’t that depend on what type of literature you mean?”

“What about Midgardian culture and customs?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Am I not allowed to be curious?”

“Am I not allowed to be skeptical?”

“Will you recommend me a book?”

“Can you tell me what genre?”

“What did Agent Romanoff send you?”

“Have you heard of Niccolo Machiavelli?”

“How long do you think I’ve been on Midgard?”

“How long do you intend to stay?”

Loki paused.

Someone cleared their throat.

Loki and Darcy both turned and saw Jane, looking supremely awkward. Darcy raised her eyebrows. “Yes?”

“Uh. Sorry. I–should I go?”
“Nah, what do you need?” Darcy asked, moving away from the counter. The strange spell was broken, but her heart still tripped a faster beat than usual, and she could definitely feel Loki’s lingering attention.

“Just–Advil,” Jane said. “For Bruce. He’s got a headache, but he’s in the middle of something, so I said I’d come. But I don’t know where it is.”

Darcy snorted. “I’m surprised you know where the fridge is, since you never use it. Here.” She dug the Advil out of its place and tossed it to Jane. “Two pills should be enough.”

“Thanks,” Jane said, gave them one more weird look, and left.

Loki started laughing.

“I believe we may have frightened Dr. Foster,” he said.

Darcy shrugged. “She never gets the question game. Questions without answers drive her nuts.”

“So you were merely playing the game?” Loki asked.

Darcy pulled out her phone. “Were you?”

“I have a favor I would ask of you,” Loki said instead of answering.

Darcy looked up from a CNN article. “I totally knew you wanted something.”

“For every sentient being, there is something they want but cannot have,” Loki said. “The trick is to determine what it is.”

“And use that knowledge to your benefit?” Darcy asked.

He spread his hands wide, palms up.

“Okay, what’s the favor?”

“Are you agreeing to grant it?”

“I’m agreeing to hear your favor and decide then,” Darcy said. “Don’t try and trick me into that kind of bargain. I’m not an idiot.”

“Clearly,” he said. Darcy looked at him suspiciously and saw nothing but faint amusement in his face. (Seriously, what did they feed Asgardian babies to give him cheekbones like that?) “I wish to be educated in Midgardian culture, history, customs, and literature.”

“Why?” Darcy asked. “And why me?”

Not that she didn’t want to.

He shrugged. “It seems I will be a resident of this realm for an indefinable period of time. It would serve me well to gain a greater understanding of humanity. And as for my choice in tutor, Barton still holds a grudge against me, and Rogers…”

“Has a stick up his ass,” Darcy finished.

Loki looked confused.
“Lesson one: any expression along the lines of “stick up his ass” implies that the dude is like super uptight and rigid,” Darcy clarified. “Steve’s a good guy. He likes the rules, but, you know, his rules. He wants there to be a structure and an order to things but if he doesn’t like the existing one, well.” She shrugged. “He’ll ignore it and make his own.”

“An admirable trait, but perhaps not one that meshes well with the God of Chaos,” Loki said.

“Exactly.”

“Aside from Rogers and Barton… Stark is a volatile man caught in his grief, and Banner and Foster have their work in the laboratories. Besides.” Loki’s eyes narrowed lightly. “You interest me, Darcy Lewis.”

Darcy liked the way her name sounded when he said it, and mentally slapped herself. “Of course I do, I’m awesome,” she agreed. “But I should warn you. There’s hundreds if not thousands of subcultures on Earth. Midgard. Whatever. I don’t know all of them, and I only know a lot about a few. I won’t pretend to be an expert in those other cultures, but I can tell you about some of them. This country, America, is the most powerful one in the world, and boy do we have some political problems, but it’s basically been a mixing pot for people from all over the globe for the last two hundred years. There’s authentic niches from other cultures all over this city: Chinatown, the Italian places–yeah, you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“I’m afraid not,” Loki said with a faint smile.

“I’m gonna get you set up with an e-reader,” Darcy said.

Her phone dinged.

“Shit. I gotta go. I have to get ready for a meeting,” she said, brain already shifting into planning mode. Eleanor O’Brien on the PR team had been giving her crap lately, and Darcy was about ready to put the girl on probation, except she had some good media connections that the team had come to rely on. It would require a delicate touch. “Meet me back here tomorrow at nine.”

“I could come to your room,” Loki offered.

Darcy straightened as his words sunk in. Her fists clenched. “Was this whole thing like a weird and roundabout way of looking for some Midgardian mistress while you’re here?” she snapped.

Loki looked taken aback. “I do not understand.”

“You don’t just–God. Okay. I take it back. Forget history, we’re gonna cover innuendoes first so you never make that mistake again,” Darcy growled. Her hands were shaking.

“It’s the only way, sweetheart.”

“Don’t call me that!”

Bruises on her arm.

Tears in her eyes.

“I have to go, Lizzie.” The whisper tore her throat. “I’ll–I’ll come back for you. But I can’t let him go through with this.”

“You come back?”
“Yeah. Yeah, Liz, I promise.”

“Miss Lewis.” Loki’s voice was almost–concerned. “Are you well?”

“Fine and dandy, Reindeer Games,” she said bitingly. It was her quickest and easiest defense mechanism: flippancy and driving people away.

Loki stepped away, face shuttering. “I meant no offense.”

“I know,” she growled, and stomped toward the elevator, good mood officially ruined. “Sometimes people don’t mean the harm they do. That doesn’t actually make it any better.”
Chapter 53

New York, United States

July 2011

Steve was late.

He’d gone for a run and gotten lost. The city had changed a lot in the last sixty years and his old landmarks were gone, some street names had changed, and he got back to the Tower forty minutes after he’d intended. So here he was, showing up at the tail end of the meeting instead of the beginning. He could only hope Tony was still here.

Steve slipped in the back door.

Voices were coming from the open, well-lit room to the left. They swam into clarity as Steve approached.

“…think it’s getting worse,” he heard a woman say. “A cop pulled me over last week, thought I was drunk. I saw a plastic bag on the road and swerved.”

Steve leaned against the door frame and counted twenty-four people sitting in simple plastic chairs. An African American man in his twenties was leaning on a lectern at the front. The woman who was speaking leaned forward with her elbows on her knees. As Steve watched, she gave a helpless laugh and shook her head. “I thought it was an IED.”

“Some stuff you leave there, other stuff you bring back,” said the man up front. “It’s our job to figure out how to carry it. Is it gonna be a suitcase or a little man-purse? It’s up to you.”

A pleasant ding came from a little plastic device sitting on the lectern.

“That’s all for today,” the leader said. “Thanks for coming, guys, I’ll see you Wednesday.”

The gathering broke up into smaller individual conversations, the shuffle of feet and clothing, and the sound of chairs being dragged and put away. Steve spotted Tony through the group, speaking awkwardly but politely to two older men in the back corner.

“Two celebrity visits in one day,” someone said. “I’m honored.”

There was a hint of amusement in the man’s voice that instantly made Steve like him. He held out a hand.

“Sam Wilson,” the leader said.

“Steve Rogers,” Steve replied.

“Yeah, I kinda guessed that,” Sam said with a grin. “Here to pick up Iron Man?”

“He’s not Iron Man today,” Steve said with a glance at Tony. “Just another guy who’s been shot at too many times to sleep easy at night. Not a soldier, but… He’s got PTSD. It got bad enough that we had to strongarm him into coming.”

“I hope we can help,” Sam said. “How about you? Sleeping easy?”
Steve snorted. “Not particularly.”

“It’s your bed right?” Sam asked.

“Huh?” Steve tore his gaze from Tony (he was just hoping that conversation didn’t devolve) and back to Sam.

“Your bed. When I was over there I slept on the ground, used rocks as pillows. Like a caveman. Now that I’m home—”

“It’s like sleeping on a marshmallow,” Steve agreed. He recognized something about Sam. They were both soldiers, scarred by what they’d done in service to their country.

“How long?” he asked.

Sam watched two women stack the last few chairs. “Two tours. We all got the same problems, man. Guilt. Regret.”

“You lose someone?”

“My wingman, Riley,” Sam said, and didn’t elaborate.

Steve nodded once. “I know what you mean,” he said.

Sam held out his hand again. “Well, thanks for dropping by. Come back around sometime, yeah?”

“I’ll do that,” Steve said, and shook Sam’s hand. “Thanks for doing this.”

“Yeah, well.” Sam shrugged. “It helps me too, you know? I’m actually headed down to D.C. for about a month or so, there’s some VA talks in the Senate I’d like to be there for.”

“High profile,” Steve commented. “See you around then.”

Sam nodded and headed back to the last few people in the room.

Tony finally broke off his own conversation and rejoined Steve. They left together and climbed in the car.

“You no-showed,” Tony said at last.

“Got lost running,” Steve said. “Didn’t have a phone with me. How’d it go?”

“Intense,” Tony said. Steve didn’t look over; he knew Tony’s eyes would be fixed out the windshield and his face would be blank. “But… it helped. I guess.”

“Good,” Steve said softly.

They rode in silence until the lights of Avengers Tower came into view.

Home. When had Steve started to consider this place home?
“So we still don’t know who’s selling these things?”

“No clue,” Steve replied grimly. “And I’m pretty sure Fury’s not telling us everything.”

Tony rubbed a hand over his face. “And my hack isn’t going anywhere, so we can’t fact check him yet. Fantastic.”

Clint banked the jet. Steve shifted his feet to maintain his balance and glanced out the front window bay; the skyline of Chicago came into view. “Do we know where the drop point is yet?”

Tony whacked the complex display built into the jet’s hull. “Can’t get a good reading. Bruce?”

“Nothing from this end,” Bruce said from his screen. “I don’t know what we can do, guys.”

“There’s no way this much Chitauri tech is just black-market sales from stuff collected in New York,” Clint called back. “It’s cropping up all over the country. Gang warfare, illegal experimentation. We’ve gotta do something to plug the leak in the dam.”

“Enough with the metaphors,” Tony snapped.

The jet jolted. Tony almost lost his balance. Steve laughed.

Tony and Bruce worked, talking back and forth in what sounded like a foreign language to Steve. He watched them for a few minutes, until his mind began to disengage, and walked up to the front of the jet.

“Hey, man,” Clint said with a grin. Steve folded himself into the copilot’s seat.

“Clint,” he greeted.

Clint snorted. “So formal.”

“I’m ninety-four,” Steve said. “People in this century have no manners.”

For some reason, that just made Clint laugh harder, but Steve never felt mocked.

“Oh, come on, that’s funny,” Clint said.

“What’s funny is how amused you are,” Steve retorted. His smile felt unfamiliar on his face, but good.

“Clint,” Tony called. “Head south again? And a little lower.”

“This is a Quinjet, not a helicopter,” Clint muttered, but he deftly banked back toward the southern part of the city, and Steve fell silent, watching the skyscrapers slide by.

His thoughts returned, as they often did, to Loki. Steve was concerned about the Asgardian’s presence in the tower and the effect he had on the team: tensions were higher and everyone was
always watching their words and behaviors. It was impossible to truly relax when an enemy could walk into the common space at any moment.

“Stewing over Loki again?” Clint asked.

Steve glanced over, startled. “How did you know?”

Clint shrugged and did something with a joystick. “You get the same look on your face whenever he’s giving you a headache. Need to talk about it?”

“I… well.” Steve sighed through his nose. “I’m worried about him turning the tower from someplace we can relax and be ourselves to a risk.”

“We’ll adjust,” Clint said.

“He’s an enemy.”

“No, he’s a potential enemy,” Clint said. “He’s also a potential ally. And in my experience, when you treat someone like an enemy, they’re more likely to become one.”

“I can’t trust him,” Steve said.

Clint grinned. “I’m not telling you to trust him. I’m saying, don’t alienate him, and maybe stop expecting him to blow up the tower or kill us all in our sleep.”

Steve looked down. “That obvious, huh?”

“You’re pretty easy to read,” Clint said. “This team–we’re pretty different people. A lot of us are pretty messed up in different ways. But we take our cues from you. Dial it back around Loki, and maybe he’ll quit hiding in his room all the time when he’s not catching the stink-eye from everyone. If he’s spending more time with us, we’re more likely to work out a balance. Either get used to him being around, or come up with a valid reason to not trust him.”

Clint was a lot smarter than most people realized. Steve knew that, objectively, but still moments like this startled him. “Sound advice,” he said.

“You gonna follow it?”

Steve considered. “Yeah.”

“I’m assuming you’ve noticed that he’s pretty interested in Darcy, then,” Clint added.

Relief washed over Steve. “I thought I might be imagining it,” he admitted after a second. Below them, the city was giving way to suburban streets. A collection of warehouses jutted awkwardly from the homes and shops to their left.

Clint shook his head and adjusted something on a panel to his left. “You’re not. I just wonder—”

“Clint!” Tony shouted.

Warnings blared all over the console.

Steve flailed for a handhold as Clint threw the jet into a nosedive. Seconds later, something white streaked past the windshield and exploded behind them.

“Suit up, somebody’s got SAMs!” Clint yelled, and wrenched back on the controls in a massive
effort to drag the jet upright. Steve twisted out of the seat and let gravity fling him backwards; he landed against the passenger seats with a painful *thud* and yanked his shield off the wall. The jet leveled out.

“Heads up!” Clint shouted, and the jet rolled. Steve barely had time to anchor himself with the seat belts before the jet rolled. Tony, halfway into his suit, clamped one gauntleted hand around a ceiling brace and his metal legs slammed into the wall with a *clang*. Another explosion rumbled outside.

“You guys gotta get out there and shut this down!” Clint shouted. “Deploying flares-”

“Get the bay door open!” Tony snapped. His faceplate clamped into place and he twisted to face the rear door.

“Got it!”

The door began to hiss open.

Deja vu hit Steve in a rush, but this time, he went with it. They didn’t have a plan but they didn’t have time to make one.

Tony fired his thrusters and shot out the gap.

Steve grabbed a parachute pack and dove after him.

Wind roared in his ears. He took a precious second to orient himself into skydiver’s posture and pull the chute over his torso. There was no time to do up the buckles and straps that would distribute the force; the ground was rushing up beneath Steve and he could do nothing but yank the cord and cling to the pack.

The impact shuddered through his shoulders and neck. *I'm gonna feel that tomorrow.* Steve’s body wrenched ninety degrees until his legs hung below, and he twisted his hands into the guidelines as his vision stabilized.

Up above, the jet was still dodging the occasional missile, but with less desperation. There was Tony, detonating the explosives before they got near Clint.

Another missile fired. Steve tracked the origin and yanked on the right guideline, turning down toward the warehouse.

They spotted him too late—the gray fabric blended neatly with the overcast sky. Semiautomatic fire tore through the chute; Steve balled up behind his shield and felt several bullets slam into it. He felt the chute shudder and start to fail. He shrugged out of the harness and dropped the last thirty feet to the roof of the warehouse.

Five guards sprinted toward him. Concrete splinters flew. Steve sprinted to his left, holding the shield in his right arm, to flank them. He angled until he could block four of the guards, dodged to avoid the bullets of the fifth, and slammed into one man full force. The guard went flying and his gun skittered across the roof. Steve snatched it up and opened fire on the others. Two fell and the others dropped back, ducking behind the rooftop door and out of sight.

Steve tossed the rifle aside, clung his shield onto his left arm, and ran straight for them.

Both guards popped around the sides of the concrete structure and opened fire. Steve dove sideways and hunkered down behind a vent. Bullets tore into the concrete on either side of him. He considered charging them, but he wasn’t sure he could cover both angles with his shield and his leg hurt like
Then he remembered twenty-first-century comms systems.

“Tony,” he snapped. “Can you get these guys off my back?”

“Can I get an entire party drunk in half an hour?” Tony said. Seconds later, Steve heard two bursts of fire from above, and the guards’ guns fell silent.

“I don’t know, can you?” Steve asked, climbing to his feet.

An explosion rocked the building. Steve stumbled, caught himself, and eyed the smoke rising from the other end of the warehouse complex.

Tony hit the roof next to the door. “I was asking rhetorically.”

Steve jogged over and kicked the lock off the door. “Was that the launcher?”

“No more SAMs from these guys,” Tony said with satisfaction, and they charged into the rooftop door together.

Steve led the way down four flights of stairs. A guard popped out at the bottom and Steve dove the last segment, shield in front. He slammed into the guard with a crunch and rolled to his feet.

Tony hauled open the door.

Bullets tore through the opening.

Tony closed it again and looked at Steve. “Think they know we’re here?”

“How many?” Steve asked. He was already reaching for a strategy, pieces of a plan spinning together in his head like a puzzle.

Tony ripped the door open, fired his thrusters, and blasted into the opening.

Three seconds later, there was a distant crash and no more bullets.

Steve cautiously poked his head around the frame. The hallway was littered with at least thirty groaning men in army surplus body armor and automatic rifles. Tony was climbing to his feet at the far end of the hallway below a sizable dent in the wall.

Steve shook his head and stepped into the hallway.

“Cops incoming,” Clint said over the earpiece. “Darcy says she’s coordinating with the local PD but try not to kill anyone. She also said this is the suspected property of Carl Mott—drug and weapons trafficker with ties to Central American cartels. They’ve never had probable cause to move in.”

“If Mott’s there, he’ll be in a safe room or bolting,” Steve said. “Clint, take perimeter watch. Tony, find the servers or computers or whatever and have JARVIS pull what he can. I’m going after Mott.”

“Preliminary scans of the building suggest there is a bunker one story underground,” JARVIS said from Tony’s suit speakers. “The entrance is likely somewhere on the ground floor.”

“Good thing we’re already there,” Steve said grimly. “JARVIS, can you tell me where exactly—”

“Through the door to your left.”
“Move,” Tony said, and blasted the door off its hinges. Steve stepped warily through the dust and smoke into a small, innocuous room full of filing cabinets.

“These’ll be useless,” Tony muttered, almost to himself. “Just a–decoy–here we go.” He shoved against the back wall.

The door rumbled and gave way.

“Thanks,” Steve said, and took off down the spiral staircase.

He heard Tony and JARVIS talking, but Tony must’ve taken it off the comm feed, because their voices faded as Steve descended. He kept his feet as quiet as he could on the stairs, shield in front of him and angled downward, but he knew he wasn’t exactly inconspicuous. Or especially quiet. Combat boots really nixed the whole “stealthy approach” thing, especially on metal stairs–

“Hey!” someone shouted, and opened fire.

With no cover, Steve’s only option was to dive headfirst down the stairs (again) and pray he wasn’t too far from the bottom.

He slammed into another body with a grunt, but they weren’t near the bottom. He tumbled over the railing and twisted in midair, putting the body of the guard between himself and the floor. They landed with a crunch less than a second later.

Steve climbed to his feet, mindful of the burning bullet track in his leg, and did a quick soldier’s scan of the environment.

Steel bunker door, straight ahead. Vestibule area–one camera, pointed at the base of the steps and not the shadowy corner where Steve and the guard landed. He shook his head. Shoddy security.

The room was small, and the camera’d be easy to evade. But that door…

Steve didn’t particularly want to shoot it down with the guard’s rifle. Not only would that make a ton of noise and warn Mott that he had a visitor, but he wasn’t sure it would work. He hadn’t totally figured out twenty-first-century security systems and weapons yet.

“Tony,” he said into the comms. “I need to get through a steel bunker. Can you get down here?”

“Kind of on the other end of the compound,” Tony said tersely. “Busy trying to get us usable intel. Figure it out, Capsicle, you’re a smart one.”

Steve gritted his teeth. Reached for the guard’s rifle.

“Hold up. Steve, is the guard wearing a name tag?” Clint asked.

Steve squinted in the low light. “Yeah, James.” Grief, his old friend, reared its head. He imagined punching it in its depressing face and focused on Clint.

“-bluff your way in,” the archer was saying. “Just say there was a disturbance, or something.”

“Got it,” Steve said.

He walked over, careful to avoid the camera’s gaze, and pounded on the door.
A second later, a scratchy intercom came to life. “Yeah?”

“It’s James,” he said. “We got a problem. Buzz me in.” He deliberately spoke quietly in an effort to distort his voice.

“Didn’t see you come down the stairs,” the voice said.

Steve made his uncertainty into irritation in his voice. “Because your eyes are always glued to the monitor, right? Open the damn door already.”

There was a long pause.

I screwed up, Steve thought, and stepped back once.

“Yeah, yeah,” the other man said grudgingly.

Steve instantly stepped to the side, out of the sight line of anyone inside. The door began to scrape open.

A helmeted head popped out. “James-”

Steve grabbed the man’s head, dragged him out into the vestibule, and got him in a deft chokehold.

When the guard stopped struggling, Steve waited another three seconds and dropped him on the ground. The door was still open. He adjusted his shield and stepped through.

The bunker was stripped down to the basics: a concrete box underground with several different rooms. This first guard post was just a chair, a monitor, the intercom, and the control for the door. Steve stepped forward into the room beyond.

“Don’t move,” someone warned.

Steve froze. A forty-something-year-old man with a beer gut and a receding hairline had a pistol in his face.

“Carl Mott?” he asked.

The man’s hands were steady. “Doesn’t matter who I am. You’re gonna let me walk out of here or I pull this trigger.”

“Either shoot me or drop the gun,” Steve said. “Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”

“You’re Captain fucking America,” Mott sneered. “I’d really rather not shoot you, I’d be the most wanted guy on the planet. They even love you in Europe—do you know how hard that is for an American these days? But I will if I have to.”

I’m sick of this.

Steve moved with brutal efficiency.

His took the first three shots and then the distance was closed and Mott resorted to hand-to-hand. He was pretty good, probably would’ve been a challenge in his youth, but this time he was forty and unfit. Mott went down in seconds.

Steve snapped a picture on his StarkPhone and fumbled with the thing for a few seconds before he figured out how to send the thing.
Is this Mott? he sent.

The reply was quick.

Got him, Darcy said.

Thanks. Steve tucked the phone away and looked around the room.

Two leather sofas, a television, a refrigerator, and a locked cabinet. Steve gave Mott a glance to make sure he wasn’t going anywhere and broke the lock off the cabinet with one strike of his shield.

“Bastard,” he muttered.

Inside was a pile of Chitauri energy weapons and a briefcase.

“Tony, I’ve got something down here,” he said. “Briefcase and Chitauri weapons.”

“Coming but I won’t be there fast,” Tony said. “Cops’re pulling up outside. What’s in the case?”

“Hold on.”

Steve grabbed the briefcase and opened it, grateful that he’d worn his gloves this morning—no fingerprints.

“Just paperwork,” Steve said, scanning the contents.

“Take pictures of it if you can,” Tony said.

“Tony-”

“Get off the high road already, that could be valuable and who knows if the police will share it,” Tony snapped. “Especially if it’s sitting on Chitauri tech!”

“Fine,” Steve muttered.

With another quick look at Mott—the arms dealer was still out of it with his back to the cabinet—Steve pulled out his phone again and started taking pictures of every page in the case, one by one.

At the bottom, he found a small plastic device with a rectangular bit of metal sticking out of the end. Steve squinted at it.

The phone vibrated in his hand.

He looked down. Copy flash drive? Yes / No

Well, he’d already taken pictures of the files. This couldn’t be that much worse. Hesitantly, Steve pressed Yes, and the phone immediately switched to displaying a progress bar.

Steve tapped his fingers anxiously while the progress bar slowly filled, not daring to move the phone in case he broke whatever connection had been accidentally made.

As soon as it finished, he stacked the papers back into the briefcase just as they had been before, stuffed the flash drive beneath them, closed the briefcase, and put it back in the cabinet.

Mott blinked blearily and spat on the floor. “I’m not telling you anything,” he growled.

“Tell me or tell the cops, what’s the difference?” Steve asked.

“I’m not talking to either of you,” Mott laughed.


Just then, a roar and a *clang* announced Tony’s arrival.

“Talk or I tell the cops how unwilling you were to cooperate with Captain America,” Tony ordered.

Steve’s mouth tightened–they were threatening Mott, technically, and he hadn’t even been read his rights or any due process–but then again they might need to act fast.

Mott paled.

“What’s it gonna be?” Tony asked.
“Police report came through,” Tony announced.

Everyone’s attention snapped to him.

“Mott’s been dealing Chitauri weaponry and other shipments for the cartels. Doesn’t know which one, though; he claims there’s some kind of anonymity buffer and he never knows who his buyers are. They pay and he drops off the shipments. He’s just the middle man.” Tony shook his head. “I don’t buy that he has no clue who his buyers are, but the guy’s set up nicely behind nine layers of security. We won’t get in there to talk to him without causing a scene, so we’ve got to work with what we have.”

“I could get in.”

Tony stared at Loki.

The unwelcome guest stood up from the sofa and approached the table, where several Avengers sat in wary silence. “It would be a simple enough matter to wear the face of a guard or another inmate or some innocuous visitor and speak with Mr. Mott in the privacy of his cell,” Loki elaborated. “No harm will come to any of the guards at the prison.”

“I notice that he didn’t mention the inmates,” Clint muttered.

Loki smiled.

Clint glanced almost expectantly at Steve.

“No,” Tony said. “Sorry, drama queen, but you’re not going anywhere.”

“Tony, maybe it wouldn’t hurt,” Steve said.

“What would we owe you in return?” Darcy asked Loki.

He shrugged gracefully. “A small favor.”

“Not worth it,” Darcy said instantly. “An unspecified favor–this kind of bargain’s too risky.”

“I agree,” Bruce said.

Loki merely shrugged again and returned to his seat on the sofa. He was reading a book, but Tony couldn’t make out the title.

“Anyway. Those arms shipments aren’t traceable right now,” Tony said in frustration. “I’ll know more once they cross-examine him in trial. He’s pleading guilty to smuggling charges and he said he’d come clean about everything if he gets a reduced sentence. We need that confession. His servers were trashed; I barely got anything off them.”

Tony’s phone rang. A second later, so did Darcy’s.
“That is not a good sign,” Darcy said. They answered.

“Mr. Stark?”

“Maybe,” Tony said.

Steve rolled his eyes.

“I regret to inform you that Carl Mott died in transit this morning.”

It took Tony a few seconds to find his voice. “What?”

“How?” Darcy demanded simultaneously.

“There was a mechanical malfunction in the transport vehicle. We’re not sure precisely what went wrong, but it blew up on the street.”

“Private property or public roads?” Darcy asked.

Tony plugged the ear not covered by the phone to block her out. “I assume you ID’d the bodies.”

“Carl Mott is one, going by dental records and clothing. One of the drivers survived with severe injuries. The other died in the ambulance.”

“Noted,” Tony said, and hung up.

Darcy stabbed the ‘end call’ button a second later. “Mott’s dead.”

“How?” demanded Steve, sitting upright.

“‘Mechanical malfunction,’” Tony sneered. “As if. Someone wanted him dead before he could talk.”

“There’s something more going on here,” Clint said.

Tony rolled his eyes. “You think?”

“What can we do?” Steve asked.

“Until I know more? Nothing, except keep going after those weapons shipments. The files and papers from that case indicate he’s been selling Chitauri weapons and other things for at least a month, but none of them have shown up on the market again. Right now, we’re stuck.”

Darcy sighed noisily. “Right now, I need to deal with the shit storm you three stirred up when an arms dealer launched SAMs in an urban area and then you killed eleven people getting inside the compound with no prior law enforcement coordination.”

“What, so we’re supposed to saddle ourselves with slowpokes who can barely shoot a gun?” Clint argued.

Darcy threw up her hands. “I’m not pissed at you, the stupid press can’t deal with the fact that we don’t do things the same way they’ve always been done, but next time maybe try to make it easier on all of us? Steve, you and I are doing a press conference tomorrow. I’m sending you a briefing. Someone show him how to open the files on a computer, because I don’t have time.”

She stormed out of the room.
“Well, that went well,” Clint muttered.

Steve sighed and dropped his head into his hands.

Tony poured himself a drink.

Darcy stuck her head back through the door. "Steve," she called. "I'm... sorry I snapped at you. Frustration. Et cetera."

"You suck at apologies," Clint said with a grin.

"Noted."

"I understand," Steve said, and managed a small smile. "I learned how to open files already."

Darcy sent them all a cocky grin and left again.

"We are so dysfunctional," Tony said to no one in particular.
That was exhausting,” Darcy muttered.

“You did well,” Steve said.

Darcy grinned at him as they crossed the lobby. “So did you, big guy.”

Maybe too well. As the stress of the press conference bled from her mind, Darcy realized that there was something off about Steve’s manner. More collected than normal–more calculated.

“Your script was well prepared,” he added.

“I know.” Darcy’s phone dinged and she pulled it out, scanning through a series of incoming notifications. “Oh, awesome, they’re already releasing transcripts of the press conference… Damn, this guy really hates us… Derek Bord.” She snorted. “That’s fitting.”

“Who is he?” Steve asked.

Darcy wondered vaguely how he could be this oblivious. “CNN reporter,” she said.

Steve laughed lightly. Darcy kept her eyes down but added that to the growing stack of evidence labeled Steve Is Acting Weird.

He pressed the elevator call button.

Several people walked by, staring blatantly at Steve.

He glared back at them.

Darcy laughed. “Embrace it. You’re a celebrity.”

“I never wanted to be,” Steve said.

“That’s why you let them parade you around in that costume, huh?”

Darcy caught his confused look and smirked. “I’ve seen the pictures. Seriously? Dancing girls?”

“It was 1944,” Steve protested after a pause. “I was under orders.”

“I’m so glad you don’t do that anymore,” Darcy said. The elevator arrived and she led the way inside, pressing the button for the common room. “People who always do what they’re told are boring.”

“I’m so glad you don’t find me boring,” Steve said dryly.

“Mmmm.” Darcy kept scrolling through news coverage of the press conference. She bookmarked everything that looked interesting but didn’t really read or process anything she saw. Her attention was too focused on Steve.

There. In her peripheral vision—a flicker. For a bare second, Steve’s tennis shoes had changed from
blue to gray.

Darcy went through her memory. It wasn’t perfect and it wasn’t totally “photographic,” but she did have good image recall, and she had only ever seen Steve in the blue shoes. And she was pretty sure she’d never hallucinated before, so either the stress was getting to her or this wasn’t Steve.

“You know,” she said idly, “I’m pretty sure there was a rule that you had to inform us whenever you used magic.”

She looked up and met not-Steve’s eyes.

His entire demeanor was sharper. It was extremely odd to see someone else’s expression on Steve’s face for the next three seconds, until the illusion faded away and Loki looked back at her.

“So how does that work?” Darcy asked, gesturing vaguely at him. His clothes were different, too: he wore a neat black button-down tucked into jeans, since all they’d given him were Earth clothes.

“Like, is it a manipulation of the minds of people around you or a manipulation of the image you present?”

Loki frowned. “I don’t follow.”

“Do you change my perception of the world or change the world which I perceive?” she clarified.

“Ah. The latter. The illusion is a construct which alters the light as it hits me. It requires more effort and complexity to similarly alter other aspects of my presentation, such as olfactory or tactile contact with another person, but I am capable of such manipulations as well.”

“Jane is gonna have a field day with you,” Darcy said. “When are you going to start working with her?”

Loki shrugged. “She has been occupied with my scepter these last few weeks and has not yet had time for me.”

“She probably forgot, honestly,” Darcy said. “I’ll remind her. Now why were you pretending to be Steve?”

The elevator stopped at the common room, and the doors slid open.

Steve was there, practically vibrating with anxiety. Darcy also noticed Tony at the bar but still focused intently on her and Loki. Neither of them showed any surprise at seeing the Asgardian in the elevator.

“How’d it go?” Steve asked.

“He plays a very convincing Captain America,” Darcy said. “Press ate it up. I mean, it’s not like anyone would even suspect that we’re hiding an extraterrestrial shape-changing sociopath, so they haven’t got any reason to think it was anyone other than you.”

“It is unlike you to be tardy, Captain,” Loki added with a smirk. “You are fortunate that I was able to take on your guise so easily.”

“I’m a little disturbed by it, frankly,” Steve muttered. “And don’t call me that.” He passed them and climbed into the elevator.

“Where you off to?” Darcy asked.
“Shower,” Steve replied. “Didn’t Loki tell you? I was in the gym, lost track of time.”

“Ah,” Darcy said.

The doors closed.

She dropped her voice so Tony couldn’t hear. “And you conveniently forgot to tell me that you took over as the public face of Steve Rogers?”

Loki smiled. “I did inform you. I simply waited until after you detected my deceit. The good Captain Rogers neglected to specify when I had to reveal myself.”

Darcy snorted. “I’ll send out a PSA.”

She glanced over at the offices. Each of the Avengers had set up an informal work station in one of the separate office-like rooms along the west wall of the common room; the glass walls of each “office” had gradually changed to reflect the person inside. Darcy’s were covered in scribbled notes done in Expo ink of various colors. Tony had done something similar, except his notes were formulae and half-finished schematics, ideas jotted down for later. Steve’s was sparse, with only two personal touches: a photograph of New York from the top of Avengers Tower and a sketch of a dancing monkey pinned above the computer.

_Does he know how to use the computer yet?_

Darcy headed straight for her office–she had to monitor the press reaction and head off any fiascos, maybe work the State Department to see if they could get her in touch with the Mexican government about the cartels. Her contacts there weren’t very well placed, but Darcy would use what she had.

“Miss Lewis.”

“Seriously, just call me Darcy. No one on does that anymore.”

“Darcy, then,” Loki corrected, still following her. “I was curious if you would take a few minutes to begin educating me on Midgardian culture?”

Darcy’s steps slowed.

She had piles of work to do, cartels to track down, and a witness dead under suspicious circumstances. She didn’t have time to be teaching a dangerous Asgardian about the hundreds of cultural traditions seen in America alone, not even counting the hundreds more unique to dozens of other societies around the world.

“Sure,” she said. “Come on in.”
He hadn’t expected her to agree so easily.

Loki followed Darcy into her disastrous office, raising an eyebrow at the scribbled notes and reminders that covered the walls. See LJ @3. Trending #avengersneedtopay #avengersareheroes #avengerssavedmylife. State Dept pc Sunday: BE THERE.

“What is that symbol of the four lines crossing?” he asked.

Darcy glanced at the window. “Um–it’s called either a pound sign or a hashtag. It can stand as shorthand for the word “number” but on social media you put it before a tag. So like people will write “hashtag tswift1989” when they go to a Taylor Swift concert. I track the trending hashtags that refer to us.”

“And what is this… social media?”

Darcy flopped into a blue rotating chair behind the desk. “Oh, boy. Okay. Are you gonna awkwardly stand there while I talk?”

Loki looked down and realized how imbalanced their conversation would be if he remained at his full height. Irritated with himself, he pulled forward a static chair from the corner and settled into it. He should’ve noticed that on his own.

Darcy Lewis was a distraction.

“Social media’s like online platforms for people to meet and talk and interact,” Darcy said. “There’s tons of them but the most popular are Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram… I should probably mention Pinterest and Tumblr, too. Oh, and Vine. Each of them kind of has a different focus or specialty.”

Loki watched her face as she talked. It was animated, lively, but he also suspected that Miss Lewis was mimicking a pattern of behavior to make her sound interested rather than actually feeling engaged by the topic. She was skilled, though; he would allow for that.

“Mmm,” he said noncommittally.

Darcy set her phone on a shiny black box to the side of her computer. The phone’s screen lit up with a symbol like a dramatically oversimplified lightning bolt. “What else do you wanna know?”

“I understand that Midgard has no centralized government,” Loki said.

“Nope. Couple hundred disparate countries. You want to know about the power balance, right?”

“How did you guess?” Loki asked suspiciously.

Darcy laughed. “Wasn’t hard. You’re a politician and a master strategist. It’s the first question I would ask.”

Impressive.
“You are correct,” Loki admitted.

“I know,” she said. “Here.” Fingers flying, Darcy manipulated the computer. Loki watched with interest as she used its touch-sensitive solid interface and a series of commands and search boxes to navigate the “Internet”. He had not had much opportunity to practice using Midgardian technology, which was so different from Asgard’s that it was almost incomprehensible to him, and this was a valuable lesson.

“Bingo.” Dary zoomed in on a cartoon map. “Kay. So this area’s called Europe. There’s a ton of countries in there but the most powerful economically and militarily are France, Germany, and England. There’s Spain, up here are the Scandinavian countries, down this way you have Turkey, Greece, Italy, Croatia, and a bunch of others.

“Over to the east more, this is Russia. It’s a huge country mostly famous for their epic failure with communism in the last century. They disagree with the US, which is this country over here—the one we’re in. The US is more or less the most powerful country on the planet, although it’s been on a bit of a decline lately but that’s a whole different topic I’m not gonna cover, and anyway the US and Russia hated each other’s guts for like seventy years. They’re at least not waving nukes in each other’s faces anymore but you can bet both of them still have missile silos aimed at the other.

“Down here, Central or Latin America’s a bunch of countries mostly speaking localized variants of Spanish because Spain colonized the entire area like four or five hundred years ago. Politically, they’re not super influential, but economically a ton of the world’s goods come from this area.

“South America’s this whole continent. Big parts of it speak Spanish also, or Portuguese, which is similar. It’s pretty rocky. I don’t know as much about South American politics, except that the Brazilian and Chilean ambassadors to the UN are awesome public speakers, so you’re gonna have to do independent research there if you’re interested.

“In the far east of the map, you have Japan, China, India, the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia. Asia has its own very complicated set of politics… You know what? I don’t have time to go into that. Here.” Darcy stood abruptly and pulled six books down off the top shelf above her desk. “These’ll give you a pretty good breakdown of the last three hundred years of our history. That one is Asian stuff, China and Japan and India and European imperialism in the area. One on Russia and communism and the Berlin Wall and stuff, one on the American founding, this talks about African history, one on European history, and this last doorstopper covers South and Latin American history pretty well. Good?”

Loki paused, mind spinning. She had certainly given him a lot to process, talking like one of the rapid-fire turrets stationed around Asgard’s borders for defense from an invading force. Midgard’s power structures were much more complex than he had previously suspected.

“That will be… satisfactory,” he said at last. “I appreciate your help.” He accepted the stack of books from Darcy.

She tapped the top one in the stack. “Rules for borrowing my books: Don’t lose them, don’t stain them, don’t dog-ear the pages, and you can write notes in the margins as long as you keep it fairly simple and don’t obscure any of the text. Capiche?”

“T____ accept these conditions,” Loki said, amused. What, precisely, did she think she could do to him if he were to disfigure one of the books?

Though he would be loathe to do so. Loki had been taught from a young age to revere the written word.
He pushed the thought away. She was not his mother.

Darcy hesitated, eyes flicking over Loki’s face.

“If you want…” she said slowly. “You could stay here. So you can ask questions while you read.”

“I would not wish to impose, or hinder your work,” Loki said.

“I wouldn’t have offered if I wasn’t prepared for you to accept,” Darcy said tartly. “Stay or go, makes no difference to me.”

He did not believe her.

“I shall stay, then. Thank you,” Loki said. Gratitude felt odd on his tongue after so many years refusing to express such sentiment to anyone.

Darcy nodded once and turned back to her computer, but even though she immediately began to enter text into a digital document, he knew her attention was on him.

Smiling faintly, Loki settled back in his chair and opened the book on the top of the stack.
Chapter 58

Avengers Tower

August 2011

“We have no way to calculate the quantum displacement,” Bruce argued. “Electron trace mapping will never work.”

“It would work if we could get the de Leyer formula fixed,” Tony countered.

Bruce shook his head. “It’s a fantasy. De Leyer’s formula’s missing way too many pieces.”

“If only he hadn’t gone nuts before he finished the thing,” Tony said irritably.

Bruce shot his (colleague? teammate?) friend a look. Tony was doing better, marginally, but Bruce still had a sneaking suspicion that it wouldn’t take much to send Tony into a tailspin. The more they stalled out on the scepter, the grouchier Tony got.

“You do know it was cocaine, right? Not insanity,” Bruce said.

“Damn the Dutch and their coffeehouses. Pepper found me in one of those one time,” Tony said absently. “Apparently I shouted something about llamas on waterslides and hit her in the face with a syrup waffle.”

“Why am I not surprised,” Bruce muttered. This was a good sign. Tony could at least talk about Pepper without having a meltdown. Improvement.

They lapsed into silence as the elevator dropped down to their private lab floor. Jane was sleeping (Darcy had discovered that Jane had been up for thirty-four hours and force-marched the astrophysicist up to bed) so Tony and Bruce had the space to themselves at the moment.

The elevator slid to a stop. Bruce stepped out and frowned. “What if we-”

He broke off very abruptly.

Bruce’s pulse tripped and accelerated. He very deliberately sucked in a deep breath. “Tony.”

“Wh-” Tony’s eyes fell on the table by the windows and he froze.

Natasha hopped down off the counter. “Hey, Tony. Miss me?”

“Get away from the window,” Tony snapped, glancing outside. “JARVIS, gimme a tint to that glass. What are you doing here?”

“Fury’s after you,” Bruce said as the windows slowly darkened. “He came to see us a few weeks ago—if he finds out you’re here…”

“We didn’t have a choice.” Now that Bruce was closer, he saw that Natasha was as tense as he’d ever seen her—more so even than when he arrived at New York in the middle of the battle, and the Avengers were outgunned and outnumbered in the middle of a half-wrecked city.

“We?” Tony asked.
Movement to the left made Bruce whip around.

A tall man with haunted eyes and a guarded face stepped out from behind the shadows of one of Jane’s massive pieces of machinery. He held up his left arm, a mobile prosthesis of gleaming silver far beyond anything Bruce had ever seen, marred by a massive gouge to the posterior surface of the bicep. It spat a lazy spark.

“I can’t fix it myself,” the man said quietly.

Tony was the first to speak. “You’re the Winter Soldier.”

The man nodded once.

Bruce glanced at Natasha.

She nodded once.

The exchange didn’t escape Tony or the impossibly dangerous (but interesting) person standing in their lab.

Tony heaved a sigh. “If you’re not going to kill me for having seen you here.”

“I wouldn’t,” Natasha said.

“Not even for him?” Bruce asked.

She didn’t respond.

“Good thing I don’t plan to put you in danger, then,” Tony said to the Soldier, and grabbed a pair of rubber gloves. “Is it causing you pain?”

“Some,” the Soldier said. “It was damaged in Moscow.”

“When you trounced the combined security of half the Ministers of the Russian government and vanished with a room full of mysteriously dead men behind?” Bruce asked, a touch of sarcasm coloring his voice. True, Natasha was part of the team, but she had walked away. Vanished. And only returned when she didn’t have anywhere else to go. Bruce was settling into the first place that had felt like home in years, and now here was this new problem threatening the fragile equilibrium he had made. He knew exactly what the consequences would be for all of them if this was discovered.

Natasha looked away.

“We need to bring the rest of the team in on this,” Bruce said. “You can’t just unilaterally decide to harbor a wanted criminal. Two wanted criminals. Loki was a group decision.”

Natasha flinched. “Loki?”

“We’ll explain later,” Bruce said.

“Long story short, I’m apparently running a halfway house for supercriminals,” Tony said, but he didn’t seem upset about that fact. “Here—”

He grabbed a length of grayish canvas from a nearby worktable (Tony’s section of the lab was a disorganized mess, much like his mind) and sliced it down the middle until he had a long chunk of fabric. Bruce had to admire the man’s ingenuity as he deftly fashioned a usable sling out of the
canvas and tied the Soldier’s arm up to his ribcage.

“What do you think, doc?” Tony asked, gesturing.

Bruce stepped closer and bent down a bit, examining the elbow angle and the security of the sling. “Hard to tell, since this isn’t exactly… normal human anatomy,” he said. “But it should be fine.”

“Excellent.” Tony grinned in a way that said he was strongly looking forward to the chaos this was about to cause. “Time to face the music.”
“What’s this about?” Steve asked his phone.

“Mr. Stark has requested your presence in the common area,” JARVIS said pleasantly. “More than that I am not at liberty to share.”

Steve scowled at the elevator’s ceiling, even though he knew JARVIS technically wasn’t hiding behind the panels. “So he’s keeping me in the dark.”

“I believe his exact words were “I want to see Rogers’ face”. Shall I contact him and request more information?”

Steve sighed. “No, I’m about there.”

“Is the gymnasium still meeting your requirements?”

“It’s great,” Steve said. And he wasn’t lying. It was actually really nice to not have to worry about how many punching bags he broke or weight machines that weren’t really meant to handle the strain he put on them or treadmills that couldn’t do what he wanted. Everything was top-of-the-line.

“I am glad.”

Steve waited, but JARVIS said no more. Evidently the conversation was over.

The elevator chimed, and Steve stepped out into their common room.

He saw in a glance that everyone was there, clustered around the table. Even Loki was sitting beside Darcy, expression edged with disdainful amusement as always, and there was Tony, looking gleeful. Everyone else seemed worried.

And Steve knew that head of red hair, standing next to an unfamiliar man. They were both facing away from him.

“Natasha,” he said with mixed relief and anger, striding forward. “Where have you-”

She turned, and so did the man beside her.

Steve missed a step. Stumbled to a halt.

His ears roared.

He knew that man. Steve took one shuddering step, and then another, and reached out with trembling hands.

“Bucky,” he rasped.

Bucky’s brows furrowed and he glanced at Natasha. Steve barely registered the shock and horror on her face, the confusion on everyone else’s. This was **Bucky**.
“You’re alive,” he managed. “That’s not possible.”

Steve’s best friend shifted uncomfortably. His left arm was in a sling. Why was it in a sling? *Who hurt him?*

“Who’s Bucky?”

Steve’s mouth opened.

No words came out.

“You are,” he finally said.

“Zima…” Natasha whispered.

Steve whirled on her, his grief transforming into anger. “You knew?”

“I swear-”

“How could you not tell me?” he snarled, stepping forward.

Instantly, Bucky was squared up beside Natasha. Something cold and vicious looked out of his eyes.

Natasha angled her body toward him, just slightly. Bucky backed down.

Steve’s eyes narrowed. Even pissed, he could read that silent language between them, a connection that came from years of working together, years of the closest kind of bond possible.

A language *he* had once shared with Bucky.

“Start talking,” he said, and didn’t recognize his own voice.
Chapter 60

Avengers Tower

August 2011

This was going to be interesting.

Clint made the connection the second Steve said his old friend’s name. He had a near-perfect photographic memory, and he knew that name from Steve’s files. James “Bucky” Barnes, Steve’s best friend and second-in-command of the famous Howling Commandos, who died falling from a train in the Austrian Alps in 1944.

Clint saw the resemblance. It was hidden behind the stubble and the hobo clothes and the long hair and the change in facial expression from the pictures he’d seen of Barnes, but this was definitely the same man.

“Steve,” he said. “How ‘bout we sit down like civilized people?”

“Wouldn’t want to start a fight and wreck this tower for the second time this year,” Darcy added sarcastically with a not-so-subtle glare at Loki.

The Asgardian merely raised an eyebrow. “No, we would not.”

“Sit? Please?” Bruce interjected.

His mild manner seemed to defuse Steve and Natasha a bit. They went from about-to-throw-a-punch to I’ll-wait-and-see-if-I-need-to-throw-a-punch and sat down on opposite sides of the table. Bucky/Zima/the Winter Soldier settled awkwardly across from Steve, eyes fastened on the blond supersoldier’s face.

When Tasha’s eyes fell on Clint, he gave her a cool, steady gaze and looked away.

She flinched, barely. No one other than Clint, Barnes, and Loki registered the movement. He took a moment of vicious pleasure.

They were supposed to be partners, to have each other’s backs. And then she went haring off to Russia without him even though she had said they’d go together after her Soldier, and then she showed up acting like nothing had changed?

He missed Maria with a sudden fierce ache.

“Natasha,” Bruce prompted.

She took a breath. “As you know, I was born in the early twentieth century. The Russians were looking for orphans to raise as special operatives, and they had no compunctions about meddling with us, which is why I’m still here today.

“What you don’t know… is that in 1953 I met the Winter Soldier.” She glanced at Bucky. “I didn’t know who he was or where he was from, and neither did he, but it did not matter. We followed orders and completed missions together for decades, until our masters in the KGB discovered that
their Soldier had been… compromised.”

“He fell in love,” Steve said. Clint glanced over. Steve’s face was grim and grieving.

Barnes nodded once, stiffly.

“I have been tracking him for years,” Natasha said. “Fury promised me time off last month and didn’t deliver, so I slipped his watchers and took off on my own.”

“And you never told any of us?” Tony snapped.

Clint leaned back in his chair. “I knew.”

“Of course you did,” Tony said sourly. “Anyone else got any secrets to share?”

Jane looked up from her iPad. “Define ‘secret.’”

“Never mind.” Tony waved a hand.

“We’re already harboring one international criminal, what’s one more?” Darcy said with a grin.

Tony shrugged. “This one’s lost a leg. It might be a little more work.”

*Damaged prosthesis, then.*

Steve looked away from Barnes just long enough to shoot Tony a glare.

“But I vote yes,” Tony said, grinning.

Darcy leaned around Clint and Steve. “Tony, you only want to do this so you can stick it to Fury.”

“Of course not,” Tony said. He infused the words with so much genuine offense that Clint believed it. Until he added, “That’s not the only reason.”


“You don’t have to harbor me,” Barnes said quietly. His eyes were fixed on the table as if he didn’t know where to look. “I still have… their influence… in my head. I’m dangerous. And I don’t want to cause you problems.”

“I left you once. I’m not doing it again,” Steve said in a voice that offered no compromise.

Barnes’ eyes flickered up to Steve’s for a bare second and then fixed again on the table.

“We cut their strings off of Natasha,” Clint said, measuring every word. “We can do it again.”

“Without SHIELD?” Bruce countered.

Clint shrugged. “We’ve got several of the people here that SHIELD would put on that project anyway.”

“You’re staying,” Steve said.

“Jane?” Darcy asked. “Bruce?”

Jane glanced up, shrugged, and went back to her tablet. Bruce paused a moment longer, thinking.
Steve was practically vibrating with tension.

“Yes,” Bruce said at last. “You may stay.”

“Do I get a vote?” Loki asked pleasantly.

“No,” said Tony, Darcy, and Steve in unison.

Clint snorted.

“All right, snowman, come with me,” Tony said, gesturing at Barnes.

The soldier furrowed his brows. “Snowman?”


“Excuse you,” Tony said, affronted. “Snowman, come on, that arm won’t fix itself.”

Stiffly, Barnes stood up and went with Tony, every movement slow and deliberate. Natasha’s eyes tracked him until the elevator closed behind them.

Clint looked over and saw devastation cross Steve’s face.

“I’ll be… I’ll be in the gym,” Steve said quietly, and shoved his chair back with a screech. He crossed the room at a fast walk and let the stairwell door slam closed behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Hope everyone's still enjoying the storyline. Thanks to everyone who's commented!
Chapter 61

Avengers Tower

August 2011

Clint was lost in his archery.

The expression on his face was one Natasha knew well, though she’d seen it rarely. He was so completely concentrated on the mechanics of *draw, nock, aim, release, repeat* that he didn’t even register her presence yet, which said a lot about his peace of mind in this tower, and the trust he felt towards the other Avengers.

It surprised her a bit to see how comfortable he had become.

“Clint,” she said, stepping forward.

He paused with his bow half-drawn.

“Natasha,” he said quietly, and relaxed the string. The arrow sat unused in its seat on the bow, pointed at the floor. He turned and met her eyes. “It’s good to have you back.”

“Is it?” she asked. “Seems like you didn’t want to see me.”

“Huh.”

“Are you angry that I betrayed Fury, or jealous of Zima?” she asked coolly.

Clint’s fingers tensed around his bow. “In case you didn’t notice, I’ve betrayed Fury too at this point, at least in his eyes,” he said through gritted teeth.

Natasha raised an eyebrow. “You’re not here on his orders?”

“He tried to send me after you,” Clint said flatly. “Told us you’re on the kill list. So’s your Soldier. So I walked.”

“I know Fury,” Natasha said quietly. “He won’t trust the Avengers anymore, not completely. So you tell me, Clint, are you here because you wouldn’t chase me down, or because Fury staged a little argument to get an inside line with the Avengers?”

Clint shook his head slowly. “Here I thought you trusted me,” he said with a bitter laugh. “At least enough to know I wouldn’t do that to the only people I’ve found a home with in the last ten years aside from you. And for the record, I’m *not* jealous. I’m pissed that you bolted and left me behind. Partners don’t do that, Tasha.”

He set his bow down with a thunk and walked out of the training room.

Natasha squeezed her eyes shut and dipped her head. *Shit.* Goddamn trust issues rearing their heads.

She swallowed a bitter draught of pride and went after him.

“Clint!”

He stopped halfway to the elevators, but didn’t turn.
“You going to make me walk all the way?” Natasha asked.

Clint turned to face her, face colder than she’d seen it since he held her at arrow-point in Budapest. “I think you made yourself pretty clear already, Tasha.”

She flinched and immediately hated herself for it. Using that nickname was a manipulative jab, a skill he’d learned from her over the years, and of course Clint would know exactly how to strike.

“You know I have… difficulty trusting people,” she said. “It’s Fury who I’m wary of here, not you. And I would’ve taken you with me. I know I promised to. SHIELD had tails on me and I had to bolt or lose my window. You were out on an op.” She shrugged. “I didn’t have a choice.”

“Logical,” Clint agreed. She studied his face. He was softening, but not enough.

“I’m trying to apologize,” she snapped.

He smiled slightly. “You kind of suck at it.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Natasha retorted, and couldn’t quite deny the relief that whipped through her muscles like cold water. It made her almost giddy. She’d managed not to lose Clint.

“Just… next time, don’t go off without backup, okay?” he asked quietly. “You’d come for me, if I were in trouble. And I’d come for you. I did, actually. But you were gone.”

Natasha didn’t quite know how to say it, but she knew it had to be cleared up. “You know I don’t– Zima is–”

Clint snorted. “Natasha, you are my closest friend. But no, I am not romantically drawn to you in the slightest, and even if I was, a blind man could see that you and your Soldier are endgame.”

Natasha snickered. “You know, you’re probably one of the only men on the planet who would say that.”

“You’re at least double my age,” he protested. “Come on, really?”

“Natalia?”

They both spun around.

Zima (Bucky?) stood in the open stairwell door, looking massively uncomfortable. Natasha studied him and already saw something she didn’t quite recognize in his face, a softness or uncertainty that had never existed before, and she knew it was because of Steve. She knew it was because suddenly, here was a link to Zima’s past, a story neither of them had ever been told.

She didn’t know how much it would change him, or if his memories would come back.

And Natasha realized that she selfishly hoped his memories never came back. James Buchanan Barnes–she’d heard the stories. He wasn’t a man who could love a blood-covered monster like the Black Widow.

She didn’t want to lose him.

Clint and Zima sized one another up, and Natasha realized too late that her Soldier had to be feeling her own discomfort upon returning to the Tower, except ten times worse. She wished she could’ve kept these two sides of her life separate indefinitely, or at least controlled the impact.
Zima opened his mouth to say something.

“Good to have you on the team,” Clint said firmly, and clapped Zima once on the shoulder. “Training room’s available for both of you,” he added, and vanished into the stairwell.

Zima relaxed fractionally and tried to smile at Natasha, though she saw the strain. “He seems… a good man,” Zima said.

“He is,” Natasha said. “One of the few people who play this game and kept their heart in the process.”

Her unspoken words dangled in the hallway between them: unlike us.

In silent agreement, they moved for the training room Clint had just vacated, because that, at least, was something they knew.
Chapter 62

Avengers Tower

August 2011

“Hold still,” the doctor snapped.

Loki resisted the urge to bare his teeth and tear away. He remembered another place and another time, another invasion of body and mind like this, when Thanos pinned him down and tortured him, bleeding him dry again and again over days to test the limits of Loki’s healing, to weaken his seidr until his mind was left bare and unprotected. Every muscle in Loki’s body was rock-hard with tension and it took all of his self-control to not jerk away from the needle again.

Dark red-purple blood trickled sluggishly from his veins.

“Has your core body temperature always been so low?” Dr. Banner asked absently, flicking through pages of data. “SHIELD records show Thor ran noticeably hotter than most humans, but you seem to do the opposite.”

“There is a wider variation on Asgard than here, I presume,” Loki said coldly. “I wouldn’t pretend to be an expert in human physiology.”

“Mmmm.” Banner seemed lost in the computer and the papers in the binder, unconcerned with Loki’s hostility. Loki glared at the blood slowly filling a small plastic bag and imagined clenching his fists and smashing the entire lab to bits.

The door slammed open and Jane Foster charged through. She obtained the general attitude and bearing of a battering ram when in pursuit of scientific advancement, much like Thor in battle, her brain entirely focused on her work and turned off from such paltry things as fear and risk. It was amusing.

“These readings are incredible,” she said. “You’re actually slightly altering the Higgs-Boson fields to manipulate matter. I didn’t even know that was possible. Can you teleport? This seems to suggest that quantum tunneling could be controlled on a much larger scale by your abilities, in which case I don’t understand how you haven’t set off a disruption in Higgs-Boson fields. Bruce, remember that conference, the hypothesis that Higgs-Boson could collapse? Quantum tunneling for instantaneous transport could reverse the Big Bang, collapse the universe in seconds back to nothing. If you can bring things with you when you teleport, then I need to send a sensor with you, gather more data—”

“Jane,” Banner interrupted. “Perhaps not at this precise moment? I’ve only just gotten him still enough to take a sample.”

Foster blinked, nodded. “Yeah, I’d love some,” she said.

Banner rolled his eyes and went back to monitoring his blood draw.

Loki rubbed his temple with his free hand.

When the plastic bag was full, Banner carefully slid the needle out of Loki’s arm and pressed a small amount of white absorbent material against the break in the skin. “Keep pressure there,” he advised.

Loki used a spark of seidr to heal the wound.
“Are we done here?” he asked coldly. He saw no point in pretending to be happy about this. They all knew how he’d resisted letting them have his blood. *My blood.* They had no right–

Loki clenched his teeth. They did have a right. A non-invasive procedure, for scientific purposes, as part of a bargain, taken from someone who had single-handedly killed hundreds of Midgardians… he had to admit that it was a valid point. A small price to pay.

But he would not, *could not,* allow them to discover the differences between himself and Thor.

“We’re done,” Banner confirmed.

“How long will it take before the results are returned?” Loki asked indifferently.

Banner shrugged. “I have a lot of other things going on, and it’s difficult for our technology to analyze Asgardian tissue, based on what we’ve done with Thor’s… A week or two, maybe more.”

“Mmm,” Loki said noncommittally. “Dr. Foster, I trust your initial results will be adequate for some study?”

“Yes,” she said without looking up from her desk. Her workspace was even more of a disaster than Darcy’s. “Yeah, this is… This is great.”

“I’ll be going, then,” Loki said.

Neither of them answered.

He shook his head and strode out of the lab.

Two weeks. He had two weeks to find a way to tamper with the data. He couldn’t destroy the sample; they would notice, of course. He would have to alter the data somehow to make it resemble Thor’s, after the tests were finished but before Banner had a chance to analyze the results.

It would not be easy, and the stakes were high.

Loki smiled thinly. He certainly appreciated the challenge.
Steve let out a sigh of relief as he stepped into his building.

It was a tiny flat, and he only spent about half his time here, but it felt more like home than his rooms in the Tower. The penthouse itself, with all the Avengers in it, was home as well, but the actual rooms? They were sterile, cold, too nice for Steve’s preference.

And there was Sharon, stepping out of her room with a laundry basket.

“Hey, Steve,” she said with a smile. “Been a few days.”

He smiled back, unsure of himself but mindful of the fact that he genuinely liked Sharon. She was kind, and honest. “Busy days,” he replied. “Looks like you’ve been busy too?” He nodded at the heaping full laundry basket.

Sharon balanced it on one hip and tugged her door shut. “Work’s crazy,” she said with a laugh. “And my boss is crazier. Fell behind on my housekeeping, and now I’ve got to lug this all the way down to the basement.”

He had an idea. Steve’s heart picked up a bit and he resisted the urge to fidget with his keys, an unfortunate nervous habit he seemed to have picked up from Bruce. “You could use my machine,” he offered. “No stairs involved. And it’s cheaper.”

“Yeah?” Sharon smiled, but there was a hesitation in her eyes. “What’s it cost?”

“Cup of coffee sometime?” Steve asked.

Her smile was soft and apologetic. “Sorry, but… I shouldn’t. I wouldn’t want to impose.”

So it was rejection. Steve fought past the sinking feeling in his stomach and nodded once at her. “I understand.”

And he did, that was the thing. He was… he was damaged goods. He was a supersoldier, a hero, an idol for the people to hang on posters and thank for saving their lives. Not a man with a mind, or a heart. No one you could go out for a coffee with. No one you could love.

Steve was so, so tired of being a hero.

“Oh, and I think you left your radio on,” Sharon said, nodding at Steve’s door.

Steve glanced over and noticed, for the first time, that she was right: classical music piped gently through the wood.

He should have noticed sooner.

“Thanks,” he said, and watched her heave her laundry basket down the stairs.
Only when Sharon was out of sight did Steve drop the friendly-neighbor facade and face his door.

That music was on the wrong station.

He reached out and touched the door.

It swung open silently. Left unlocked and ajar. Two things Steve would never do.

On quiet feet, he stepped inside.

The kitchen was clear. So was his bedroom, the first door on the right.

Steve picked up his shield from where it hung in the hall and slung it onto his left arm.

Through his speakers, a saxophone wailed.

Shield ready, he stepped around a corner and into his living room, every muscle tense and every sense screaming that something was not right.

Maria was sprawled out on a chair in the corner.

Steve relaxed, a bit, and set the shield down. “Maria,” he greeted.

She opened her eyes. “Sorry to walk in on you like this,” she said quietly.

“Care to explain?” Steve’s eyes flicked over the walls and what he could see through his windows. Nothing out of the ordinary, nothing dangerous. But he was still on edge.

“My boyfriend threw me out,” Maria said.

“Didn’t know you had one.”

Her lips twisted in an expression that was not quite a smile. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Rogers.”

Steve noticed that there was a notepad tucked in her lap.

Maria saw him notice, raised a finger to her lips, and handed him the pad.

\textit{Apartment is bugged. SHIELD compromised. Tried to take me out.}

Steve looked sharply up at her. “And why’d you come here?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

Steve waited while she added something else to the pad.

\textit{SHIELD watchers on the Tower.}
He nodded and took the pad.

*Are you wounded?*

*Not badly. Possible fractured rib, minor concussion, dislocated shoulder. Generally battered and sore.*

Steve looked her over carefully, but her assessment seemed accurate. There was a gash on her forehead and a streak of dried blood running down her eyebrow and the bridge of her nose. It made her look dangerous and a little bit wild.

*I’ll get you to the tower. Tony can protect you, hide you.*

Maria hesitated when she saw the note.

*Ok. Don’t trust anyone.*

Other than the Avengers.

*I never do,* Steve wrote, and reached for his shield.

Gunfire shattered the silence. Maria jerked and dove for the floor. More bullets tore apart the chair while she army-crawled to Steve. He hauled her around the corner and into the hallway.

“Take–” Maria gasped, thrusting something at him.

Steve shoved the bloody flash drive into his pocket without thinking.

His door slammed open. Steve leaped upright into a defensive position, shield up.

It was Sharon. Sharon, with a gun in her hand and an uncompromising expression on her face.

Sharon was SHIELD.

Steve tore the paper off the notepad and stuffed it into Maria’s bloody hand. She nodded at him to let him know she would keep it safe.

“Get her to the hospital,” Steve ordered, and bolted.

He crashed through his window and fell into a roll on the roof of the next building over. There was the shooter, running away over the rooftops.

Steve went after.
The shooter was shorter than Steve, and leaner. He was stronger. They were matched in speed.

The shooter dove off the next rooftop and rolled into a sprint across a gravel buffer. Steve picked up the pace. If the shooter jumped—there wasn’t a roof to catch him, he’d lose the chance to find out who wanted Maria dead—

The shooter skidded to a stop.

Steve hurled his shield.

The shooter dodged, barely, and the shield skidded in the gravel until it came to a stop.

“Surrender,” Steve demanded.

The shooter turned to face him for the first time. Steve’s eyes widened fractionally. It was a woman. She would’ve been pretty if not for the hateful sneer twisting her face.

“I’ll never talk,” she snarled, and slammed her teeth together.

A horrible sense of déjà vu washed over Steve and left him feeling sick. He lunged forward and pried her mouth open as she collapsed, shaking.

White foam erupted from the woman’s lips.

Steve felt the exact moment she died. Even then, the hate never left her face.

He closed his eyes for a long moment and couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d been here, done this, before.

It wasn’t possible. Hydra was gone.

Chapter End Notes

I have their notes in different handwriting fonts in the Google doc, but AO3 doesn’t support font changes, so I’ve italicized everything and hopefully you can work out who says what from context/content. If it’s too confusing, comment, and I’ll figure something else out. Thanks!
“We’re gonna fake her death,” Bruce said.

Steve blinked. “Ah… why?”

“Somebody’s trying to kill her,” Darcy said, twirling her pen around her fingers. Bruce saw Loki tracking the movement. Tracking her. “If they think they’ve succeeded, they’ll drop their guard. Hopefully.”

“What about Sharon?” Maria asked. “She’ll tell Fury Bruce and the SHIELD researchers treated me in the tower clinic.”

“Clinic,” Tony muttered. “She calls a state-of-the-art private hospital a clinic.”

“Sharon trusted Steve enough to get you here,” Darcy said, ignoring Tony. “But she’s gone already, back to SHIELD. We’ll dupe her like everyone else.”

“Cold,” Jane said quietly.

Darcy looked at her friend. Something flashed between them. “Necessary.”

Jane nodded and went back to her tablet. That easily.

“And how are you going to fake my death?” Maria asked. So logical, even wounded and barely mobile, eyes glazed by drugs. Going one step at a time through the whole plan.

Bruce twisted his hands together beneath the countertop. He was standing behind the granite because it made him feel more secure, separated from the situation, and he needed that illusion of control. The other guy was raging and furious at this transgression, this attack on someone Bruce considered colleague/ally/friend, and Bruce felt dangerously close to the edge.

“An experimental drug to drastically lower heart rate and core temperature but keep the body’s essential functions alive,” he said. This was good. This was cold hard science; this was something he was good at, could focus on, and still be productive. It was a life raft and it would keep him afloat. “It’s serious, but you’re in no real danger now. We’ll fake a complication. Internal bleeding... that’s plausible. We inject you tonight. I’ll dose you enough for twenty hours. More than that and you risk not coming back. Then it’s a simple matter of rushing Maria’s “body” down to the tower clinic. They’ll confirm she’s dead, put her in a body bag, and send her over to the morgue. Hardest part to fake will be rigor mortis.”

“I’ve got myself down for cremation on SHIELD files,” Maria said.

Clint met her eyes. “So we do a body swap at the crematorium, and I start planning a memorial service for you.”

Maria nodded.
“I can find a Jane Doe who looks more or less the same for the swap,” Bruce added. “I’ve got friends at the cadaver labs at a couple universities in the area.”

“Clint, you can handle the swap?” Darcy asked.

Clint frowned. “I’d prefer a partner. It’s kind of hard to fight and disable security cams while carrying a dead body.”

“I’ll go with him.”

Everyone stared at Natasha.

She lifted her chin and looked between them. Surety gleamed in every line of her posture. “We’ve been partners for years. No offense meant, but Steve and Tony, you’re our other fighters and you are not great at subtlety.”

“Hey,” Tony said, offended. “I can be subtle.”

“Like that one time we found you in a depressed funk, bloody and bruised, eating donuts on top of the donut shop in your Iron Man suit? Subtle like that?” Natasha shot back.

Darcy snorted. “Please tell me you have pictures of that glorious moment,” she said.

“Absolutely,” Tony said. “They’re all in my file. You can read them as soon as you break the four levels of encryption and bypass JARVIS’ mainframe.”

“I’ll get there,” Darcy said with supreme confidence.

Steve rubbed his temples. “So… we’re doing this?”

“Guess so,” Clint said, looking perfectly content.

“I’ll get on the phone,” Bruce said.

“Mr. Rogers, there is a call coming for you from a classified number,” JARVIS broke in.

Steve patted his pockets. “My phone…”

“Here you go, Grandpa,” Darcy said, and passed over her own. “JARVIS, can you reroute it?”

“Consider it done,” JARVIS said. Seconds later, Darcy’s phone began to ring.

Steve stared at the screen for a moment, then pressed Accept on the screen, and put it on speaker.

“Captain Rogers?”

“Rumlow?” Steve asked, frowning.

Maria lifted her head. Bruce realized that at some point she and Clint had ended up holding hands.

Tony reached for a viewscreen folded up near the ceiling, pulled it down, and started typing.

“Yeah, it’s me. You’re wanted at headquarters.”


Tony swiveled the screen to face the team, and they saw a mug shot of a SHIELD agent. Hard-
faced, dark-haired, with an impressive list of successful missions. One of Fury’s top agents. Maria’s and Clint’s faces tightened.

“I didn’t make the call,” Rumlow said.

“Who did?”

“Pierce and Fury.”

“Of course they did,” Steve muttered. “I’ll be there in a couple of hours.”

“See you then,” Rumlow said, and hung up.

“You’ve worked with Rumlow?” Tony asked.

Steve shrugged. “We’ve met a few times around SHIELD headquarters. Scuttlebutt had it he was going to be assigned a task force under me, but then we kind of broke with Fury, so… that’s probably not going to happen.”

Maria frowned.

“And Pierce?” Bruce asked. He really needed to pay more attention to people.

Or he could be like Jane. He glanced over and saw that, as usual, she was not paying attention, her thoughts still immersed in the tablet that she was furiously typing away on.


Tony angled his head toward Maria. “What do you know about Rumlow?” he asked.

“Nothing concrete,” Maria said. “But you know I wouldn’t say anything if I wasn’t sure.”

“I have good instincts,” Clint added. “And I agree. Don’t trust him.”

Steve looked troubled. “This should be fun,” he muttered.

“I’ll have a jet prepped,” Tony said, and headed for the elevators.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone!! Sorry I’ve been MIA for the last week (ish?). My laptop broke and I just got it back today. I should be back on my regular posting schedule from here on out.
Chapter 65

Avengers Tower

September 2011

“I don’t like it,” Natasha said quietly.

He rested his hand on her shoulder. Natasha was the only person he knew who he was comfortable touching casually. “Neither do I,” he admitted.

She looked up and studied his face carefully. “Zima…”

“I remember him,” he blurted. “I think. It’s like… I have all these images in my head, facts, memories, all coming back to me in a blizzard. I can’t grab hold of any one thing for long.” He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to ground himself in the middle of the chaos that had taken over his mind since Captain America called him by a dead man’s name. “His mom’s name was Sarah,” he whispered. “We were… we were friends. He was so much smaller—all skin and bones and stubborn pride. But that all happened to a different person.”

Natasha turned into him, reached up, and gripped his shoulders. “It’ll be fine,” she said softly.

“But what if it’s not?” He knew he was being illogical and didn’t care. “I–I can’t be two people, Pauk. That man I was… he was good. He was a friend and a soldier and he fought for what he believed in. I’m a hired killer.” He looked down at his hands in the breath of space between their bodies: one flesh and bone, knuckles callused and skin riven with scars, the other silver and still dysfunctional. Stark had done a temporary repair on the metal arm while he worked on a modern prosthesis. “I’m a monster. I can’t be both.”

“Why not?” Natasha asked softly. “I’ve changed as well, my Zima. We can find our way out of the dark places. Find something to fight for other than just our masters.”

He laughed. It sounded broken. “I don’t even know my name, Zima? ‘Soldier’? James Buchanan Barnes? Bucky? That man I was…” He thought about the few memories that had come back with any kind of clarity. “He would hate me.”

“So you hate yourself?” Natasha asked.

Startled, he looked up and met her eyes.

“He is you,” she pressed. “You are Bucky. All those memories, they’re still hiding in your brain. They could never beat that decency out of you. Why do you think they kept wiping your mind? Why do you think they used me as your leash for so many years? Why do you think they put you in cryo storage? There’s a goodness in you that even their neural programming and beatings and training couldn’t stamp out.”

He bowed his head and let out a long breath.

Natasha pulled him closer and pressed her forehead to his. “We’ll figure it out,” she promised, voice like steel. “We always do.”

“My spider,” he murmured, and closed his eyes.
“I owe him,” she admitted a moment later.

“For what?”

“Trusting me,” she whispered. “Caring for me. Taking me into this place. I owe all of them, really, but Steve could’ve turned against me and everyone but Clint would’ve followed his lead. And Clint’s instincts are rarely wrong. If he thinks there’s something off about this situation, then I can’t let Steve go alone.”

“He’ll never let you.”

They both flinched apart.

Miss Lewis and Stark stood in the door to the storage room.

“How long have you been there?” Natasha snapped.

Darcy shrugged. Her face was cool, unimpressed. He had to admire her composure. And intelligence. Darcy Lewis was a force to be reckoned with; Zima/Bucky (he still didn’t know what to call himself) had worked that out quickly. “Not long. I just heard your last two sentences. Very touching.”

“She’s right,” Zima said quietly. “Rogers… Steve… he won’t want us to risk it.”

Natasha eyed Stark and Darcy warily. “And what about you two?”

Darcy smirked. “Let’s just say we’re more open to… alternate solutions.”

“You want us to go after him,” Natasha said flatly.

“All the rest of us are too high-profile to just drop off the grid,” Darcy said. “And at any rate, Clint and Tony are the only of us who are good in a fight.”

“The Hulk?” Zima asked.

“Has a tendency to smash buildings along with the bad guys,” Tony said. “You think I’m incapable of subtlety? Wait till you see the big guy in action. Bruce is perfectly content staying here and working in the labs until we have absolutely no other option.”

“How will we get out?” Natasha asked. “SHIELD’s likely got a blanket over this place thicker than surveillance on the Iranian embassy.”

“You forget our houseguest,” Darcy said with a smile.

Zima narrowed his eyes slightly. Her expression was icy and uncompromising, the face of someone who had lost and lost and lost again in life, who wasn’t going to just let herself lose again without a fight. This was something she wanted, and she knew what had to be done to accomplish it.

Loki stepped around the doorframe from the hallway.

“You set me up quite nicely for a dramatic entrance,” he commented.

“Least I could do,” Darcy said. “Loki’s agreed to smuggle you out past the SHIELD cordon.”

“What makes you think he’ll come back?” Natasha asked.
Darcy shrugged. “He wants to be here, not the other way around. And we have a tracker-slash-voodoo-sensor that Jane and Tony cooked up. He’ll cover you three in an illusion, get you out of SHIELD’s way, and head on back.”

“I’ve got disguises ready for after Loki leaves you,” Tony said. “Clint helped me put them together. A private helicopter will be waiting at a small airport half an hour south of here by car. There’s a silver Honda Civic parked three blocks away, plate 535-ZUR.” He tossed Natasha a set of keys. “Address of the airfield is already in the car’s system. You’ll get there an hour or two behind Steve, but it’s the best I can do short-notice.”

“It’s excellent,” Natasha said. “Who’s been coaching you in covert ops?”

“SHIELD,” Tony said.

Zima blinked.

“You people keep forgetting that I have a genius level IQ,” Tony said. “I was a SHIELD consultant? Remember? Fury gave me access to lots of mission files–and those he didn’t, I got anyway. There’s not much of a difference between learning how you guys work and how to evade you.”

“All clear?” Darcy asked, looking around the room. “Yes? Kay.”

“Come with me, please,” Loki said, smiling like a shark, or a wolf. “I’ll be kind and allow you to masquerade as a couple, hmm?”

“Can I punch him?” Natasha asked Darcy.

Darcy patted Loki’s shoulder irreverently. “He’s actually being helpful; let’s not punish good behavior.”

“I would appreciate it if you would cease comparing me to a pet,” Loki muttered.

Darcy laughed. “I know, and that’s exactly why I keep doing it. You’re fun to irritate. Good luck sneaking out, guys. I need to go put out a fire involving yet another State Department junior aide who thinks they can bring the Avengers to heel.”

She marched away down the hall.

“I pity that aide,” Loki commented, then looked surprised that he’d done so.

“You have no idea,” Tony informed him. “She got into an argument with me about a month and a half after she came on-staff…” He shook his head. “Not pretty. Definitely got my attention, though. You guys ready for this?”

It took Zima a second to realize Tony was talking to himself and Natasha. “Yes,” Natasha said.

“You are certain you can evade SHIELD?” Loki asked. “It would not go well for your teammates should Director Fury discover that you are helping the good Captain.”

“He doesn’t like to go by that title,” Tony said.

Natasha glanced up at Zima. He smiled a little at her.

“Between the two of us,” she said, “we should be able to work it out.”
“Welcome, Captain,” Pierce said.

“Sir.” Steve didn’t bow, or salute. This man had not earned either. He rolled his shoulders to settle his brown leather aviator jacket better on his frame and moved farther into the room.

“Do you know why I’ve called you here?” Pierce asked.

“I assume it’s in conjunction with the attempt on Maria Hill’s life.”

“An attempt that was successful,” Pierce said, watching Steve carefully.

Steve flinched slightly. “Hill’s dead?”


Steve flexed his jaw slightly. “I’m… sorry to hear that. She was a good woman, a good agent.”

“She was both of those things,” Pierce agreed. “Or at least, she appeared to be.”

Steve knew he wasn’t imagining the subtext of this conversation. “Sir?”

“There’s been a leak,” Pierce said. “Last week, we sent in a tactical strike on a group of pirates who hijacked a transport ship, the Lemarian Star, that was carrying classified information. Agent Jasper Sitwell was on board, but evidence gathered when the tac team took the ship back suggests the pirates were working for someone else, and that they weren’t there to ransom hostages like they claimed.”

“You think it was a cover for an information sale,” Steve said.

Pierce tapped the images on his desk of a ship in dark waters, a bald bespectacled agent labeled Jasper L. Sitwell, a captain’s chair riddled with bullet holes. “Yes.”

“And you think it was Maria.”

“Only five people knew about the information on that ship,” Pierce said. “Two of them were Fury and myself. Two of them have already been cleared. Hill was the only one of SHIELD’s high-ranking operatives who remained under suspicion, and now she’s dead.”

“Deal went bottom up?” Steve asked.

“We think so.”

“I don’t see what this has to do with me,” Steve said.

“You were the last person to speak to Maria Hill alive,” Pierce said. “She doesn’t have a boyfriend.”

Steve thought of Clint. “I thought that was odd.”

“What did she tell you?”
Beneath Pierce’s sight line, Steve’s fists were clenched. “She told me the apartment was bugged,” he admitted.

“Did she tell you she was the one who bugged it?”

Steve said nothing. He didn’t believe it. He didn’t want to believe it.

Pierce sighed. “Captain Rogers, I know this must be hard for you. But I really need your cooperation. The fate of this organization might depend on it. We don’t know what information Maria managed to sell, or how long she’s been doing this. The damage could be… extensive.”

“We didn’t have much of a conversation. She gave me a note.” Steve held out the paper on which he’d forged Maria’s handwriting on the way down there. He was a bit of an artist, after all—not a very good one, but skilled enough with pen and paper to do this.

Pierce examined the three words on the torn, crumpled note.

Trust no one.

“I wonder,” Pierce said, “if that included her.”

Steve was silent for several heartbeats.

“If I think of anything else, I’ll let you know,” he said at last.

“Please.” Pierce studied him for a long moment and heaved a sigh. “You’re dismissed, Captain. Thank you for your cooperation.”

Steve nodded sharply and slung his shield onto his back as he left.

His thoughts swirled as he climbed in the elevator and pressed the button for the underground parking garage. What Pierce said… it couldn’t be possible. Maria would never betray SHIELD like that. She might not have agreed with all of Fury’s decisions, but Steve knew she loved her country and would live and die by her principles. They were not so different in that way.

The door opened, and four men in suits entered, talking among themselves. They pressed the button for the lobby.

Steve shifted beneath their wary, nervous looks. They probably thought they were being subtle about staring, but there wasn’t a lot he didn’t notice in his immediate environment, and this was not quite normal behavior. Especially at SHIELD, where people were used to the sight of supersoldiers and spies and assassins and guns.

He shook off the weird feeling as paranoia, but kept his senses alert.

The elevator slid to a halt a few stories below, and six men in tactical armor entered, their boots tramping on the metal floor. They were silent and intimidating. The suits’ conversation died rapidly.

Steve cut his eyes left and right as the elevator began to descend again. His instincts, honed in the fire and death of World War 2, were prickling, screaming that there was violence in the air.

Calm down. Calm down. It’s nothing. This is the Triskelion, for God’s sake—SHIELD wouldn’t wish
The elevator stopped again, and Rumlow entered with several more agents.

“Captain,” Rumlow said cordially.

Steve nodded back. “Good to see you again.”

“How about that tac team Fury’s putting together, eh?” Rumlow asked.

Steve shrugged. “He seems to be caught up in other things at the moment.”

“True, true.”

Rumlow turned to face the doors.

Steve shifted his feet. There were men on both sides of him, behind him. He did not like this at all.

The man in front of him was sweating. Steve saw a bead of liquid coalesce in the short hair at the nape of his neck and roll down his damp skin until it vanished in his collar.

He resisted the urge to rub his temples. So it was going to be a fight.

There was no other way this would end.

“Before we get started,” he said wearily, “does anybody want to get out?”

Me, Steve thought bitterly.

A frozen silence ensued.

The man behind Steve moved. He twisted, ducked; the shock probe landed on his biceps instead of digging into his ribs and sent a painful jolt up and down Steve’s arm. He broke the hand holding it, slapped the barrel of a stun gun away from his face, swung a punch and felt cartilage crunch beneath his knuckles.

Somebody got hold of his left arm, drove it back into the wall. A cold cuff clamped down around his wrist and Steve looked up, saw it glowed blue and strained toward the metal wall with the force of a strong electromagnet. He fought. Lashed out with both feet and his free hand, sending one powerful strike after another into even the suits. Their ambush had backfired a bit. In such close quarters, no one had room to maneuver, and it became a war of attrition. Who would last longer—Steve or the SHIELD agents?

He launched a vicious kick into somebody’s gut, right below the protection of their tactical vests, and as the man doubled over someone else slammed into Steve’s hip. He lost his balance and the cuff whipped his arm back, pinned it to the wall.

Steve strained against it. Couldn’t free himself. Half the elevator was down, somebody had stopped its descent between floors. Shock probes slammed into his stomach, one and another and a third, and his entire body went rigid.

Pain is just a message.

Steve put all his weight on the cuff. It held. He lashed out with both legs, used physics and sheer battering ram strength to slam one assailant after another into submission. He got an opportunity, took it, latched his right hand over his left and gritted his teeth as he strained against the cuff.
“Give it up, Rogers,” Rumlow panted. Steve fended him off with both legs. “No one can beat that magnet—”

Steve slammed him in the chest with both heels. Rumlow went flying across the elevator, cracked his head on the glass, and went still.

With a massive effort, Steve tore himself free of the wall with enough force that he slammed into two of the remaining agents and took both of them to the ground.

He dodged a shock probe. It found a place in the side of the man beneath him who instantly shuddered and went limp. Steve rolled over, flipped upright, kicked his shield up into his hands. The remaining agents went down in a matter of seconds.

He surveyed the bodies strewn about the elevator.

Stupid bastards.

Steve ran to the door of the elevator and hauled it open with his fingertips.

A troop of armored soldiers ran down the hallway toward him.

He gritted his teeth and shoved the doors shut again.

No hatch in the ceiling. It’d take too long to batter his way through the floor, and they could remote operate the elevator down if they had to, crush him before he ever exited the shaft.

There was only one way down, and it was going to hurt like hell.

Somebody slammed into the elevator door.

Steve backed up, braced himself, and charged.

He broke through two layers of glass and out into the sky.

The glass roof of the atrium loomed below.

Steve angled his body. Aimed in the bare half-second he had. Curled in a ball behind his shield.

The first impact hurt. The second one echoed through his entire skeleton. Left his ears ringing, head spinning, every part of him in pain.

Steve rolled over and clenched his teeth.

Pain is just a message.

He got one foot beneath himself. Two. He settled his shield on his left arm and looked around. The atrium had gone silent. Dozens of people stared at him in various states of shock and fear.

Steve bolted for the parking garage.

He seemed to have bought himself precious time with the jumping-ten-stories stunt; no one was prepared to come after him down here. He made it to the garage and fired up his motorcycle and only had to go through four individual guards or agents along the way.

Steve slung his shield into its slot between the handlebars, started the engine, and peeled out of his spot, aiming for the square of sunlight that was the garage entrance.
A siren blared.

The steel bunker bay doors started to seal.

Steve gritted his teeth and opened the throttle all the way, flying past lines of cars and vans.

The square of light shrunk farther and farther.

Steve shot right at the closing steel. He’d decapitate himself if he didn’t—

He punched the booster and leaned as far to the left as he could.

The motorcycle’s engine roared and it shot forward. Gravity tugged Steve’s cheeks. His left knee was inches from the ground.

He slipped through the gap with inches to spare.

Steve wrenched the motorcycle upright and steered back into a straight line, right down the long road leading across the water away from the Triskelion.


A SHIELD dropship dropped out of the sky with a scream of hard-working engines.

A mechanized voice ordered him to halt and surrender.

Steve’s heart pounded louder than the dropship.

A machine gun leapt to life and sprayed the pavement with bullets.

Steve dodged left, right, left, in varying turn radii, screaming across the pavement in irregular, unpredictable patterns. A few stray bullets pinged off his shield or the metal of his bike, but he dodged the worst of it—got in range—

With the ease of practice, he slung his shield sidearm. It lodged in the left engine of the dropship. The engine shuddered, roared, belched black smoke. The dropship tipped.

Steve hit the front brakes of his bike. It wrenched onto its front wheel and he used the momentum, hurling himself forward and up straight into the glass cockpit of the dropship. There was less than half a second during which Steve met the terrified pilot’s eyes. He twisted and vaulted off the glass up onto the wing. Ripped his shield free. The dropship jerked left and banked toward the pavement. Steve launched himself over the edge and skidded along its hull. He stabbed his shield through the metal just in time and hung there one-handed. The dying dropship shrieked and spun. Pavement, then water, then pavement again spun beneath his dangling legs.

He somersaulted up over the edge of the ship, pulled his shield free at the apex of his spin, landed and rolled along its shifting top surface.

There. The fins. Steve aimed, threw. The shield ricocheted between the stabilizers, leaving twin gouts of fire and smoke. An explosion shook the dropship. He sprinted down its spine. Another of the ship’s convulsions launched him after the shield. He caught it one-handed and rolled when he hit the ground.

Behind him, the dropship crashed into the pavement, effectively bottlenecking any ground pursuit.

Steve shook with fury and adrenaline. This was SHIELD—SHIELD, compromised; SHIELD, trying
to kill him.

He’d been right to distrust the Director. He’d been right to break from them. He’d been right to take
his own path.

Steve was armed only with his shield and his skills; he was wearing a leather jacket and a cotton T-
shirt and jeans. He was not equipped to go on the run.

But he knew (hoped) that some of his teammates would come for him. And he knew SHIELD
would come for him as well. So he didn’t exactly have a choice but to hide, and stay alive, until he
could figure out his next move.
Chapter 67

Avengers Tower, New York

September, 2011

Tony drummed his fingers restlessly on the table.

Everyone in the common room focused intently on Darcy, who sat in her office, listening intently to someone on the phone and scrolling through something on her computer. Tony chanced a look around. Loki was the only one who didn’t seem concerned, but he was certainly paying attention. He’d only come back about ten minutes prior from seeing Natasha and Barnes on their way, and now this. Even Jane had put aside the reams of data she’d been gathering on Loki’s use of voodoo magic (as Darcy called it) and was paying just as much attention as Bruce, Tony, Loki, and Clint.

Darcy said something and put down her phone. Tony tensed.

She pressed her fingers to her forehead for a moment, head bowed over the desk, seemingly unaware of how closely they all watched her. Or just choosing not to care. Tony was forcefully reminded of how much responsibility she was shouldering for the rest of them, despite her youth. Twenty-four? Twenty-five? Something like that.

Darcy dropped her hand, stood up, and marched out of her office. By the time she reappeared from behind the reams of paper and notes taped to part of the glass, she was back in business.

“Here’s what we know,” she said, sitting down in her usual place. “Steve went into the Triskelion. Steve left the Triskelion like a bat out of hell forty-one minutes later on his motorcycle, took down a SHIELD dropship that tried to stop him, and has since vanished into DC. SHIELD’s coordinating a manhunt for the “fugitive”, which is not going well, since as you can imagine the local law enforcement people are not happy about trying to catch Captain America. But there’s enough people cooperating–enough people who’ve bought into those bogus news stories about how we’re “dangerous rogue operatives” or whatever–that he’s in trouble.”

“So basically, we’re stuck here,” Clint said.

Darcy nodded. “We’re all too high-profile. If one of us vanishes, the timing’ll raise eyebrows.”

Tony pulled out an iPad.

“Whoa, Tony, are you betraying your company?” Clint said, laughing. “No more StarkPads for you?”

“The security on these is weaker than StarkPads,” Tony said. “It was easier for me to tweak because it’s not as well made. This thing is completely off the grid. Natasha and Barnes each has an iPhone that’s been similarly altered and linked to this guy.” He patted the opaque iPad. It was a pretty good piece of technology, if he was being entirely honest, but StarkPads were still better.

“Untraceable?” Clint asked.

“You insult me,” Tony said.

“So now we wait,” Darcy said softly, staring at the iPad. “We wait for someone to contact us. And until then, we can only keep going like we have to throw off suspicion, and hope our teammates
don’t end up in a maximum security prison. Fantastic.”

“Speak for yourself,” Tony said. “I’m working full-time on the SHIELD hack. JARVIS has been running into some problems, so it’s taking longer than expected, but I’m close. It seems more important than ever that we get into their network and sort out exactly what’s going on.”

“Agreed,” Darcy said grimly.

Tony watched them disband. Darcy was working, as usual; he wasn’t sure where Clint was going but he was ninety percent sure it was to check on Maria, still recovering in the private infirmary several floors below. Loki was nowhere to be seen. Tony couldn’t find the energy to worry about the Asgardian at the moment. Bruce and Jane had already disappeared back to the labs; Jane was caught up in the data from Loki and Bruce had some other project going. Tony couldn’t bring himself to find interest in that either.

He found himself wishing he could go back to the VA.

_Idiot_, he thought irritatedly. *They didn’t want you there. Spoiled billionaire showing up with PTSD from a few firefights? Ridiculous. Your trauma’s nothing compared to theirs.*

But he had to admit that Sam Wilson’s advice had had a ring of truth to it. Tony had done some internet research and paid close attention during the three sessions he’d attended at the VA. It was helping. A little.

He squinted around the penthouse. This would be easier in his rooms, probably, but Tony couldn’t bear to be in there for long. He’d been sleeping on a cot in his engineering lab for weeks, or on the couch, or in his safe room, but in the case of the latter, even that was questionable. It was a space designed for him to share with Pepper, and Tony couldn’t help being reminded of that fact every second he spent in there. It only made him feel worse.

*Guided breathing,* he reminded himself. *Guided breathing, then some exercise. You can beat this.*

The words rang false, but that didn’t matter. Tony was used to lying to himself.
Chapter 68

*Homeless Camp, Washington, D.C.*

*September 2011*

“Are you sure he’ll be here?” Zima asked.

Natasha nodded slightly. “I’m fairly confident. I told him about some of the bolt holes I’ve set up with Clint over the years.”

Zima considered. He wasn’t jealous, and he knew Natasha was aware of that, but he found himself intensely curious. His memories were settling slowly, like layers of sediment, and the years he’d spent with her as the KGB’s best operatives were clearest in his mind. In all that time, Natasha had never made friends with anyone besides himself.

She answered his question without being asked, voice low as they walked slowly through the homeless camp, wary of the eyes on their backpacks and jackets and sturdy shoes. The roar of cars on the overpass above their heads made it easy to speak without being overheard. “Clint is my best friend,” Natasha said quietly. “Aside from you, I trust him more than anyone on the planet. He understands me, and I him. And… I owe him.” She let out a low laugh. “He had the drop on me once, in Budapest. Don’t tell him that—he believes I was never in danger, but if he hadn’t hesitated, there’s a good chance I’d be dead right now. Instead he brought me in. Gave me a second chance. He never ran from… from what I am. And he’s not exactly a saint either.”

“I like him,” Zima admitted. “He seems a good man.”

“He is.”

They continued in silence for another few steps, senses on high alert.

Footsteps reached Zima’s ears. Not their own. Keeping pace but hidden to their right.

Natasha tensed.

Zima glanced at her. She raised an eyebrow. He twitched his hand to his right. She nodded once.

They turned the next corner, around a massive concrete support block, and stopped short.

Steve Rogers stood there, feet planted and arms crossed, in a battered leather jacket. A bulky package that was probably his shield hung over his shoulder, wrapped in canvas.

“Hey, Steve,” Natasha said casually.

Zima remained silent.

Steve glared at them both. “You shouldn’t have come.”

“Who were you expecting to show up at a rendezvous point I told you about?” Natasha asked.

“Someone else! This is too dangerous!”

“We’re disguised,” Natasha pointed out.


“I recognized you.”

“You’re a trained soldier with an augmented mind and enhanced senses who knows us well,” Natasha countered.

Steve’s face didn’t soften. “Hoods and eyeglasses?”

Natasha shrugged. “It’s worked before.”

Steve sighed and finally relaxed a fraction. “You should go back.”

“You know we won’t.” Zima spoke for the first time.

Steve’s eyes lifted to his, and Zima saw the depth of his grief. “I had to say it anyway.”

“You should crash at my place.” He kept his tone light and tried not to betray an ounce of worry for his skinny, asthmatic friend.

Steve frowned up at him. “I can make it on my own.”

“You don’t have to,” he countered.

“Thanks, Buck.” Steve didn’t smile. “But you know I do.”

Zima closed his eyes. He was Zima, he was Bucky. And he remembered the man standing across from him.

Steve Rogers mourned the loss of his friend. He didn’t realize it was a different man who’d come back.

“So what’s the plan?” Natasha asked.

Steve dug in his pocket. “Right after she was shot, Maria gave me this.” He pulled something out of his pocket.

“Flash drive,” Natasha murmured to Zima. To Bucky. A headache pounded in his temples. “Stores data. You know what’s on it?”

Steve shook his head. “I don’t know enough about modern technology. Could be a virus, could be something else, but odds are it’s encrypted somehow and I won’t know how to deal with that.”

Natasha pulled out one of the two iPhones that had been waiting in the glove box of the car Tony procured for them. There was one number programmed into each, and it was labeled Avengers Encrypted Line.

“Then let’s call someone who does.”
Chapter 69

City Center Mall, Washington, D.C.

September 2011

“First rule of going on the run is walk, don’t run,” Natasha chided. Steve really was terrible at this. His soldiering skills were great in the field but not so good at subtlety. It was a miracle he’d evaded capture on his own even for a day.

“If I run in these shoes, they’ll fall off,” he muttered.

Natasha ignored him. The shoes were not great for running, but it was necessary to blend in, and their disguise required the kind of clothes that a young and relatively financially stable couple would prefer. Not too expensive, not too flashy, but still trendy. And if they had to run, then that meant they’d have much larger problems than the shoes.

Up ahead, the Apple store came into view.

Its glass front was simultaneously a blessing and a curse. Natasha appreciated being able to scan the entire store before they entered, and the open space made sure no ambush would be effective, but she didn’t like being so exposed to every shopper who strolled by. It was midafternoon on a Saturday, so the mall was packed.

Steve’s head kept swiveling, intensely scanning the crowd.

“Relax,” Natasha said under her breath, and led the way into the store. She headed for a computer that would give her a view of the employee exit and the main entrance to the store at the same time. “You stick out like a sore thumb.”

Steve made an effort. Now he just looked massively awkward. That was better than predatory-and-about-to-start-a-fight, though, so she didn’t comment.

Natasha woke up the MacBook Pro and opened Safari with a few clicks. It really was a nice laptop. Maybe she’d buy or steal one after they got this mess sorted out.

Steve leaned over her shoulder and watched carefully as Natasha navigated Safari to open the URL Tony had told her would securely link him to the data from a distance.

Seconds later, a chat room came up. A message was waiting for her. This is Tony. Insert the flash drive. Odds are there’s some kind of tracking software on it, and as soon as it connects to a network, red flags will go up. I have to be fast.

“Here goes,” Natasha said, and slid the drive into the port.

A Finder window opened. She opened the drive and dragged its contents off the Finder and into the Safari secure chat room as Tony had instructed.

“Level Six homing program,” she murmured. “We have nine minutes.”

“Can you crack it?” Steve asked.

Natasha tilted her head and kept her thoughts from turning to Zima, as they always wanted to. “The person who created this was slightly smarter than me. It’s protected by some kind of AI, keeps
rewriting itself.”

Can you crack it? she asked Tony.

The response was quick. This is Darcy. He says not in the time window; it’ll erase itself if he slips up. Too risky. But we might get a location on where the drive came from.

**SHIELD developed a program to track hostile malware, Natasha typed.**

Tony already stole it off their servers, Darcy responded. He reluctantly admits that it’s a well-written program.

Steve snorted.

The chat room opened a screen-sharing field. Natasha watched Tony work; his keystrokes showed up along the bottom, scrolling along almost faster than she could process. She shook her head. He really was a genius. He was altering the malware-tracing program on the fly to make it run faster, help it along. She committed his tactics and alterations to memory for later use.

Natasha sensed someone’s attention on her and subtly scanned the room. Just an Apple employee. Nerdy, harmless twentysomething headed their way. She pretended not to notice him.

“Can I help you with anything?”

Steve flinched slightly.

“Oh, no thanks,” Natasha said with a smile. “My fiance was just helping me with some honeymoon destinations.” She thanked the skies that there were no good pictures of her on the Internet, even after New York. Tony had worked hard to help keep her cover.

Steve was a whole other ball game. Even with a cap and glasses, he was pretty recognizable, and even Tony couldn’t do much with the bevies of information available on Captain America.

“Right! We’re… getting married,” Steve said.

The employee squinted at him. “Congratulations! Where are you thinking of going?”

Steve glanced at the screen. “New Jersey.”

“We’re on a budget,” Natasha explained, and slipped an arm around Steve with an affectionate smile.

“I feel you,” the guy said. He glanced at Steve again, and his eyes widened.

Natasha felt Steve tense beneath her arm.

“I have those exact same glasses,” the employee said, looking extremely excited.

She smirked and turned back to the computer. “You guys are practically twins.”

“I wish,” the Apple guy said, and gestured awkwardly to Steve’s toned six-foot-four frame. “Specimen.”

Steve looked massively uncomfortable. Natasha stifled a laugh.

“Uh… If you guys need anything, I’m Aaron,” he said, and tapped his name tag. Tried to tap his
name tag. He missed, poked himself in his pectoral muscle, and blushed. “H-have a good day.”

“You too,” Natasha said.

Steve watched the guy walk away.

“Calm down,” Natasha chided.

“He was weirdly friendly.”

“That’s his job. Stop looking like a guard dog. Honeymoon planning makes people happy.”

Steve leaned against the table. “You said nine minutes.”

“Almost done.” Natasha slipped into the program from her end and started helping Tony out. She’d caught on to the pattern of what he was doing with the homing program. “We’ll be fine.”

The homing program settled. A message popped up from Tony. Got it.

“Wheaton, New Jersey,” Natasha said, and registered the look on Steve’s face. “You know it?”

“I used to,” he said cryptically. “Let’s go.”

Natasha pulled the flash drive out and tucked it back in her pocket. She closed Safari, wiped her browsing history, wiped the laptop’s hard drive, and shut it down. “Time to go.”

They stepped out into the crowded aisle.

Steve immediately started tracking their company. “Standard tac team,” he murmured. “Two behind, two across, two straight ahead. If they make us, I’ll engage, you hit the south stairwell to the metro.”

Natasha took in the situation at a glance. Rumlow’s guys. She recognized their bios. They’d see her and Steve in seconds. “Shut up, put your arm around me, and laugh at something I said.”

“What?”

“Do it!” she hissed.

They neared the SHIELD agents. A head turned toward them in slow motion.

Steve slung his arm around Natasha, leaned in, and did a passable imitation of a proper laugh.

They cruised by. The agents didn’t give them a second glance.

“See?” Natasha said with a half smile.

Steve glanced behind them, surprise obvious on his face. “I can’t believe that worked.”

“You’re a brilliant team leader,” she said. “A great tactician and a great soldier. But this is espionage. Different craft entirely.”

“So I’m learning,” he muttered. Natasha got the distinct impression that he was simultaneously impressed by her and frustrated at his own inability to blend.

“You’re doing fine. Just remember, flying under the radar is the best way to stay hidden. Being on the run isn’t so complicated.”
Steve made an effort to tone down his constant environmental scanning.

They made their way down three levels to the street, having chosen to avoid the parking garage in the interest of not getting trapped. Zima was outside, hopefully with a car by now. They’d deemed him too conspicuous to go into the mall; it was warm, and with a metal arm, he couldn’t exactly walk around indoors in long sleeves and gloves.

Natasha and Steve noticed Rumlow at the same time.

*Shit.*

He was coming up the escalator right next to theirs going down.

Steve tensed so much he became like a piece of wood.

Rumlow’s head scanned.

Natasha turned to Steve. “*Kiss me,*” she hissed.

“Huh?”

“Public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable,” she insisted.

Steve was frozen. 1940s manners. Or lingering loyalty to Peggy Carter. Natasha didn’t have time to care. She grabbed his sweater and hauled him down for a long kiss.

Rumlow slid by three flights away.

Natasha released Steve but tucked herself into his chest and giggled. Behind the facade, her mind worked furiously, analyzing the movement patterns of the crowd and searching for the quickest way to the double doors that were just coming into view.

“Come on,” she said. “Zima’s waiting.”
Chapter 70

Outside Wheaton, New Jersey

September 2011

Steve came awake swiftly.

It took him a moment to reorient himself. Car. Driving. Wheaton. His old army base. Bucky and Natasha were sitting in the front two seats, not talking, but companionable nonetheless. Steve, who hadn’t slept for twenty-two hours, had spent the drive north sleeping on the backseat.

He sat up now and took in the scenery. It had changed, obviously, but something about the shape of the hills in the distance, the curves of the road… Familiarity tugged at the edges of his mind, like a dream.

“Faster! Come on, Rogers, move your skinny ass!”

The gates came into view ahead. Chained shut.

“Break the gate?” Steve asked.

“Maybe let’s try and keep a lower profile,” Natasha suggested drily. “Hide the truck, hop the gate on foot.”

Steve considered it, then nodded. It was a good plan; it would prevent a trail.

Natasha drove off the edge of the road and into the scrubby forest. Steve kept his eyes behind them, watching for anyone else on the road, but he remembered that there wasn’t anything out here beyond the army base and that didn’t seem to have changed much.

“Why’d the Army leave this place?” he asked.

“Stark said it was a problem with the water supply,” Bucky said without turning around. Steve fixed his eyes on his once-best-friend’s head and wished they could talk without Natasha right there. But this wasn’t the time.

“Sounds like a fake excuse,” he commented instead.

Natasha shot both of them a wicked little smile. “Let’s check it out.”

The deja vu got stronger inside the fence.

Steve, Natasha, and Bucky crept through overgrown scrub grass and concrete buildings, the utilitarian forties architecture that was somehow comforting to Steve. He felt much less anachronistic here. This place, like him, was a holdover from another time, but he’d adjusted better than the buildings. He thought.

“Tracker says the drive came from that building,” Natasha said, pointing to the command center. Steve vaguely recognized the building; he hadn’t spent much of his time on this base in the spaces usually reserved for the upper echelons of military personnel.
Steve tried the door. Locked.

Natasha tugged him aside and he obeyed without thinking. A blur of movement in Steve’s periphery made him jerk around just as Bucky slammed his metal fist into the door right above the handle. His punch tore straight through the bunker and smashed the lock beyond repair.

“Buck!” Steve snapped without thinking.

Bucky looked at him with an indecipherable expression on his face. Steve almost staggered back a step. Bucky had never been unreadable to him before.

“I just meant… your arm is still damaged,” he said, looking down. “Tony’s new prosthesis isn’t ready to replace it.”

“All right,” Bucky said at last, pushed open the door, and walked inside.

Natasha poked Steve in the stomach, keeping him in place when he moved to follow. “Give him time,” she advised in a whisper, dark eyes looking up at Steve.

Steve just pressed his mouth into a line and stepped around her.

His eyes adjusted almost immediately. Bucky was moving soundlessly across the dim room, examining the dusty chairs, crooked shelves, and scattered papers left lying about.

An electrical buzz made Steve flinch. He and Bucky twisted around in unison and found Natasha standing by the light switch.

She shrugged. “Figured it couldn’t hurt.”

“Why does this place need power?” Bucky said.

Steve looked around. “They’re hiding something.”

Natasha moved farther into the room, taking it in at a glance. For an instant, the predator peered out of her eyes, and Steve remembered why Fury had been so afraid of this woman that he brought Captain America back from the dead as a fallback plan against her.

*That backfired*, he thought with grim humor.

“There’s Howard Stark,” Natasha said.

Steve and Bucky followed her gaze.

A series of portraits hung above a map on the wall. Howard, several other men in lab coats or suit jackets, and…

Natasha’s eyes were on Steve. “Who’s the girl?”

He couldn’t tear himself away from her picture. Strong. Beautiful. Immortalized in this dusty hideout. That little smile, like she knew everything you weren’t saying and she was just waiting for you to mess up.

The ache of missing her got so strong Steve had trouble breathing.

“Peggy Carter,” Bucky said quietly.
Steve blinked and turned away.

Bucky and Natasha lapsed back into silence and helped him search.

Something was off. Steve narrowed his eyes.

There. A seam. And several feet over, another one. And the proportions of the bookshelf were all wrong.

“If you’re already working in a secret office,” he murmured, moving into position, “then why hide the elevator?”

Bucky and Natasha flanked him as he stepped forward and shoved against the mobile section of shelving. It creaked and swung inward. Behind it was a set of antiquated elevator doors, familiar to Steve but extraordinarily dated compared to what he was starting to consider normal.

Bucky stepped forward and pushed the button.

With a rattle of long-unused gears and rusted motors, the elevator rose to meet them.

“I’m not sure I want to trust myself to that thing,” Natasha remarked, but when the doors clattered open, she was the first inside.

There was only one button. Steve looked at his companions, shrugged, and pressed it.

The elevator descended for what felt like a mile but couldn’t have been more than two hundred feet. Steve had seen bunkers deeper.

When it finally ground to a halt, they stepped outside into a short hallway. It ended abruptly after ten feet.

Steve paused, eyes wide.

They were in an old, old server room. These were the kinds of computers he recognized, but–why would they have been left here?

Peggy. Howard. The founders of SHIELD. An organization with a history of dirty secrets and skeletons in its closet.

Bucky reached the obvious conclusion at the same time as Steve. “SHIELD’s hiding something down here.”

Natasha pointed at the central control station. “That’s new.”

A multi-port USB jack, much cleaner than the rest of the room, was connected to the system.

Natasha twirled the flash drive around her fingers and leaned forward, plugging it into the jack. A prompt popped up on the screen. *Initiate system? Yes/No*

“Shall we play a game?” Natasha said with a smirk, and glanced over her shoulder. “It’s–from a movie–”

“I’ve seen it,” Steve said drily.

“I haven’t,” Bucky muttered.
“Aw, do you feel left out?” Steve said without thinking, and flinched.

It was what he would’ve said to the old Bucky. The one he’d lost in 1944.

But Bucky grinned. A tiny, fleeting expression, but there all the same.

A warm glow lit Steve’s chest.

“Y-e-s, spells yes ,” Natasha said quietly.

All around them, server banks whirred to life.

The central computer lit up with fuzzy static that slowly resolved into a crude black-and-white rendering of a face. A horribly familiar face. Steve’s stomach twisted. Bucky backed up three steps.


“It’s a recording,” Natasha said, but Steve heard the doubt in her voice. The search for an explanation.

“I am not a recording, Fraulein. I may not take the same form as the man Captain America took prisoner in 1945, but I am.”

Steve glanced over. Bucky looked sick.

A picture of Dr. Arnim Zola from a 1945 *New York Times* came up on the screen.

Bucky staggered back.

“You know this thing?” Natasha asked tensely.

“Arnim Zola was a German scientist who worked for the Red Skull,” Steve said, mind spinning, trying to process the implications of this. “He’s been dead for years.”

“First correction: I am Swiss,” Zola–or what was left of him–rapped out. “Second, look around you. I have never been more alive.”

Steve looked around. At the spinning server banks, the bundles of cable, the dust, the still-powered abandoned building. This place was meant to be Zola’s tomb, and his salvation.

“How?” he asked.

“I received a terminal diagnosis in 1972,” Zola said. “Science could not save my body but SHIELD decided that my mind was worth something. Worth saving on two hundred thousand feet of data banks. You are standing in my brain.”

“That’s not creepy at all,” Natasha muttered.

Steve didn’t let himself relax. There seemed no weapons in the vicinity, but that meant little. This was SHIELD. And then there was Bucky, skulking back by the elevator, curled in on himself like a dry leaf. Steve could help him later. “How did you get here?”

“Invited,” Zola said. Somehow he sounded smug.

“They thought I would help their cause,” Zola sneered. “I also helped my own.”

No. It wasn’t possible. But the clamoring horror in Steve’s mind told him that it absolutely was. “Hydra died with the Red Skull.”

“Cut off one head, two more shall take its place.”

He wouldn’t believe this until he absolutely had to. “Prove it,” Steve snapped.

“Accessing archive,” Zola said instantly.

No no no.

A scratchy old shot of Johann Schmidt appeared on the screen, followed by images from SHIELD’s founding. “Hydra was founded on the belief that humanity cannot be trusted to be free,” Zola said. “Our error was in underestimating the resistance we would face when trying to take that freedom. The war taught us much. Humanity needed to surrender its freedom willingly.”

The footage changed to newspaper articles about scientific efforts, about the Cold War and the struggle against Russia. “After the war, SHIELD was founded and I was recruited. The new Hydra grew. A beautiful parasite inside SHIELD, and eventually, in other organizations. The triads. MI6 and MI5. The KGB.”

“Malyen,” Natasha said.

“You are correct, Miss Romanoff. Malyen Vasiliev was indeed one of our primary recruits within the KGB. His influence allowed us the unrestricted use of some of their most valued assets. I must say, Mr. Barnes is a fascinating subject. I am still not sure entirely why he was the only test subject to require frequent re-treatment to prevent both memory and personality from returning. Eventually the problem became so prevalent that he was sent into cryosleep until technological advancements justified another attempt. Hydra agents were meeting just a few weeks ago to discuss new options. Miss Romanoff, you may recall crashing that particular party.”

“I’m glad I killed them,” Natasha snapped, furious in a way Steve had never seen her.

Steve looked behind himself. Bucky was all the way back by the entrance hallway, shaking his head slowly, arms wrapped around his stomach and shoulders rolled forward.

When he turned back around, the images were more recent. Bombings. Wars. Flooded streets. “For seventy years we have been feeding crisis, reaping blood and war and chaos. And when history did not cooperate…”

There was another image. A newspaper heading. 1969. Something about a car crash. “History was changed.”

The images faded back to Zola’s eerie abstract face.

He’d already fought this enemy; already given everything he had to bring them down, sacrificed his best friend, his safety, his innocence, his life to make sure Hydra never threatened anyone again. And he’d failed.

“That’s impossible, SHIELD would’ve stopped you,” Natasha said, visibly shaken.
“Accidents will happen,” Zola said coolly, and showed a picture of Maria’s battered fake-dead face. “Hydra has created a world so disastrous that humanity is finally willing to sacrifice its freedom for its safety. Once the purification process runs its course, Hydra’s new world order will rise.”

Steve’s greatest fear. That he was worth nothing. That all his struggles were in vain.

“We won, Captain. Your death amounts to the same as your life. A zero sum.”

Steve hurled his shield brutally through the computer.

To his left, another monitor flickered to life. “As I was saying…”

“Does this guy never die?” Natasha asked.

“What’s on that drive?” Steve snarled.

More images appeared: modern video footage and stills of massive hangars, SHIELD logo everywhere, of Pierce and Fury, of massive helicarriers. “We have designed a new class of warships designed to stay in the air indefinitely with the aid of modern weapons technology, synchronized with targeting satellites and equipped with long-range precision guns that are capable of eliminating Hydra’s enemies at a rate of one thousand per minute.

“This is Project Insight.” The SHIELD logo dominated the screen. “And it requires… insight. So I wrote an algorithm.”

“What does it do?” Natasha asked, stepping closer.

“The answer to your question is fascinating. Unfortunately, you shall be too dead to hear it.”

Steve heard the doors begin to close. “Buck!” he shouted, and hurled his shield.

Bucky caught it and threw it again in one smooth motion from his position by the hall. Steve heard a reverberating impact.

Bucky caught the shield again.

“Too late!” Bucky shouted, sprinting toward them.

“Steve!”

He turned. Natasha. A pit in the floor. She jumped in.

Steve dove for it in tandem with Bucky, both of them stretched out over the floor, racing time.

Natasha huddled at the bottom of the indentation.

An explosion shook the bunker, and the world went black.
Chapter 71

[Classified Address], Washington, D.C.

September 2011

Sam whistled tunelessly and fumbled with his keys.

It had been a good day. Several well-delivered talks and serious progress made with the lobbyists. He’d be going home tomorrow, and he had to clean up Terry’s house before he left.

The front door finally (grudgingly) yielded. Sam made a note to tell Terry to lube up that lock and dropped the keys on the little table just inside.

The house was nice. Spare, but nice. Very much a bachelor home. Sam wished Terry could’ve been here—he missed his old friend—but a family wedding had called him off to the West Coast this month.

Sam flexed his shoulders to work out some tension, decided to go to the gym later, and headed straight for the kitchen.

The doorbell rang.

He heaved a sigh and almost didn’t go answer it. Damn solicitors. They never bothered him in New York. He couldn’t wait to get home.

But it’d be rude to leave even a solicitor out on the doorstep indefinitely, so he headed back to the entry, slid back the deadbolt, and opened the door.

And froze.

Three people stood on the doorstep. Two of them he recognized: Steve Rogers and Natasha Romanoff.

There was a beat of silence.

“Aren’t you on the run?” he asked. “I know I said you should drop by, but this kinda seems like a weird time.”

Steve’s face was grim. “I’m sorry to do this, but… we need a place to lay low.”

“Everyone else is trying to kill us,” Romanoff added. Sam almost laughed.

He glanced at the third member of their party, standing with shoulders hunched and a hood pulled up over his head, hands in his pockets, as if any of those things could hide the fact that he moved and stood like a soldier, and a deadly one. Plus he was almost as tall as Steve, and just as broad-shouldered.

Sam glanced up and down the street. No one seemed to have noticed his suspicious visitors.

Wordlessly, he stepped aside and allowed them into the house.

Turned out, the hooded man was the Winter Soldier.
“I thought you’d be older,” Sam said. “Been hearing rumors about you for years.”

The Winter Soldier, aka Bucky Barnes, hunched at the table. His eyes were on the mug of tea in his hands. One metal, one skin. “I’m older than I look.”

“Yeah,” Sam said, “I know.” He looked at Steve and Romanoff. “So SHIELD’s been compromised. No one knows about this but you. The rest of your team are stuck in that tower because if they go MIA, it’ll raise some red flags. And you need to figure out what exactly was on that drive so you can take down the same enemy you two—” pointing at Steve and Barnes— “took down in the forties.”

“Pretty much,” Romanoff said. She tilted the mug Sam slid her way. “Why do I smell citrus?”

“Orange spice black tea,” he said. “Do you know where to start?”

Steve tapped the table thoughtfully. “Zola showed us Pierce was involved in this project. So was Fury. We don’t know how much either of them was involved in Hydra, but… we have to assume the worst.”

“They’re both sitting on top of the most secure building in the world,” Romanoff countered. “There’s no way we take either of them without getting ourselves killed.”

“But it can’t just be the guys at the top,” Sam said.

They both looked his way.

He refused to be intimidated by the fact that he had three living legends sitting in his kitchen, drinking tea and discussing a kidnapping. Sam had his own skill set, and he found himself thinking that this was a valid fight. “They’ve got to have underlings, people to do the dirty work. Fury and/or Pierce can’t have done this on their own, even under fake SHIELD authority. Some of the guys down below have to be part of this.”

“Zola’s algorithm was on the Lemurian Star,” Steve said. “Pierce gave me a name. Jasper Sitwell.”

“I know him,” Natasha said. “He’s based here.”

“Well, that’s convenient,” Steve said. “Do you know where he lives?”

Romanoff smiled and held up a tablet. “I know someone who can find out.”


Romanoff used the tablet to open up a chat room of some kind. “It’s secure?” Sam asked.

Barnes lifted his head for the first time. “Stark set it up. It’s as secure as it’s going to get.”

Sam tightened his grip on his mug. Something about this guy rubbed him the wrong way, but he wasn’t going to pick a fight. Not without his gear, anyway.

He emptied Terry’s dishwasher and worked on replacing everything he’d moved in the kitchen in the last two weeks. Romanoff tapped away at the tablet behind him and Steve and Barnes sipped their tea.

Sam’s mind whirled as he worked. He could let them go. Probably should, to be honest. Help out with some food and cash and send them on their way. That’s what a sensible man would probably do.
But he couldn’t deny that he missed… making a difference. And he’d never been particularly sensible. No sensible person would’ve signed up for what Sam did in the army.

He found his file in the bag on the counter.

“Got it,” Romanoff said.

Sam turned around.

“Address and workplace. He bounces between the Triskelion and another government building downtown. Tony’s got his schedule for the next two days coming.”

“So how to the three most wanted people in Washington kidnap a SHIELD agent in broad daylight?” Barnes asked.

“You don’t.” Sam dropped his file on the table.

Steve picked it up. “What’s this?”

Sam grinned and sat down at the fourth chair. “Call it a resume.”

“Is this Bakhmala?” Romanoff asked, examining a page of pictures. “The Khalid Khandli mission. That was you.” She gave him an assessing look. “I didn’t know you were pararescue.”

“Who’s that?” Steve asked, pointing at one of the pictures.

Sam’s smile faded. “Riley. My wingman.”

Steve nodded, understanding written all over his face.

“You lost him?” Barnes asked quietly.

“Fly in the night mission,” Sam said plainly. “Standard rescue op, nothing we hadn’t done a thousand times before, till an RPG knocked Riley’s dumb ass out of the sky. Nothing I could do. It’s like I was up there just to watch.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve said simply.

Sam shrugged off the grief. It never went away, but in four years, he’d learned to manage it, work around it.

“I heard they couldn’t bring in the choppers because of the RPGs,” Romanoff said, tapping the picture from the Khalid Khandli op. “What did you use, a stealth chute?”

“Nope,” Sam said. “These.” He flipped over a few pages to the back of the file and tapped the top page.

Steve’s head snapped up. “I thought you said you were a pilot.”

Sam grinned. “I never said a pilot.”

“I can’t ask you to do this,” Steve said. “You got out for a good reason.”

Sam paused, sorted through his reasons. Was it really because he wanted to get back in, or was he just trying to impress Captain America?
“Dude, if a bunch of legends like you are having trouble, what kind of guy would I be to kick you out on your own?” he said.

Barnes was still inscrutable. So was Romanoff, technically, but she at least didn’t look like she was considering snapping his neck.

“So where do we get one of these?” Natasha asked, tapping the page with Sam’s old gear.

“The last one is at Fort Meade, behind three guarded gates and a twelve-inch steel wall,” he said, and knew they’d hear the bitterness in his voice. Why the Army had locked up the wingsuits and quit training people in their use Sam would never understand. “Can we do it?”

Steve looked to Barnes, who shrugged.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Romanoff said.

Sam grinned. “Then let’s get going.”

And he realized he was looking forward to being back in the fight.
Chapter 72

*Avengers Tower, New York*

*September 2011*

“Bruce!”

Bruce flinched, almost dropped the scepter, and whipped around.

Darcy stood there, hands raised. “Whoa. Hey. You were in the *zone*, dude. I called your name like five times.”

“That’s what happens when a scientist is working,” he said with a bit of a bite.

Darcy shrugged, unconcerned. “I’m used to it from Jane, not you so much.”

“Come down here more,” he said, and smiled a bit. His heart rate was settling. Bruce let himself relax. “Not just when you have news.”

“How’d you know I have news?”

“Because you’ve been glued to your round table discussion with Tony and Clint for four hours even though there’s no new progress, and I doubt you’d walk away unless you had an update.”

“Huh,” Darcy said. “Fair point. Yeah. There’s news. Tony almost had JARVIS tell you, but I wanted to stretch my legs. Where’s Jane?”

“I made her go sleep,” Bruce said. “It’s been a while.”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Of course it has. Whatever, we can catch her up later, I don’t want to wake her up.” She boosted herself onto a counter and kicked her legs, looking nothing like the clever and increasingly influential person Bruce knew her to be. More like an irreverent college kid. “So here’s the rundown: Steve is still on the run, Natasha and our new buddy Barnes are with him, and they’re going to kidnap a SHIELD agent as soon as they finish robbing Fort Meade to get gear for an ex-military buddy of Steve’s that he apparently met at one of Tony’s things at the VA.”

Bruce blinked. “What?” The last he’d heard, Steve, Natasha, and Barnes had been coming back from a supposedly abandoned army base. The Swiss scientist-slash-Hydra-agent apparently stored for forty years on 1970s databanks had been weird enough—Bruce would’ve loved to get his hands on that tech and figure out how they did it—and then they’d told him that Hydra had been leeching off of SHIELD for years, hiding inside it like some kind of parasite. Bruce tensed just thinking about it. If Fury was involved in this–

*No use jumping to conclusions. You’re a scientist. You’re above this. Stay on track.*

“Remember those VA meetings Tony’s been going to?”

“Yeah?”

Darcy shrugged. “Steve befriended this guy Sam Wilson there. Sam was down in DC for some kind of conference and after Steve, Natasha, and Barnes almost got themselves blown up, that’s where Steve dragged them to lay low. Evidently he decided to trust Sam and now Sam’s on board with the whole take-down-SHIELD thing, but if he’s gonna help he needs his old army gear. Which is
apparently a wingsuit with guns on it.”

“You lost me at “wingsuit”,” Bruce said.

“Want to just come join the round table?” Darcy said. “What’re you doing down here, anyway?”

“Scepter,” Bruce said. “Still. I’m afraid we might lose jurisdiction over it in this mess.” He pointed at a cage full of lab rats. “It has some really interesting effects on neural networks, and Tony discovered two new atomic elements already. But it’s running on its own right now. I have an hour… Might be nice to get out of the lab.”

“Come on then,” Darcy said, grinning, and bounced down off the table.

Bruce followed her to the elevator with only one backward glance at the scepter. He needed to process the data he’d been collecting and store it on an offshore drive for safety, and then there was Loki’s blood tissue, which he still hadn’t gotten around to examining. So much to do.

But he’d been down here for almost eight hours now. And he was part of the team. He should know what was going on. Wanted to know. Bruce was worried about Steve and Natasha, and even Barnes, a little, simply because both Steve and Natasha would lose it if he died. So he’d go along with Darcy.

Up on the common floor, Bruce headed straight for the fridge. His stomach growled loudly as the smell of food. “Who made sandwiches?” he called over at the table. Only three seats were occupied: Darcy, Tony, and Clint.

“You’re welcome,” Clint said back, grinning.

Bruce turned back to the fridge.

The sandwiches were gone.


She looked at him with perfectly innocent eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Liar,” Bruce said.

Loki materialized out of thin air three feet from Bruce’s left. Bruce flinched backward and bumped into the fridge.

Loki held a sandwich out to Bruce with a smirk.

“Very funny,” Bruce said drily, and accepted it. “Darcy, I assume you knew about this?”

“I hadn’t the faintest idea,” Darcy said.

Clint snorted.

“Right,” Tony said. “We totally believe you. Bruce, get some food and come on over. I’m making progress on the SHIELD hack. Finally.”

Loki tossed the other three sandwiches back in the fridge and Bruce closed the door. They congregated at the table, Loki sliding in next to Darcy.
Bruce examined him. “Why are you here?”

“You are much more interesting than the view from my window,” Loki said smoothly. “I swore not to reveal your secrets, if you had forgotten.”

Bruce looked away. It was true, and he believed that Loki would keep their bargain for the moment simply because he had something to lose by breaking it and no potential benefit that Bruce could see. That didn’t mean he trusted their Asgardian houseguest.

“What have you found?”

“A backdoor channel into SHIELD’s network,” Tony said. He didn’t smile, but his eyes were burning with the focus and engagement that Bruce hadn’t seen in months. “I went looking for Jasper Sitwell’s itinerary and found a way through their firewalls for the first time. JARVIS is chipping away at it. But from what we’ve got so far, it was someone really high up in SHIELD selling Chitauri tech on the black market.”

“Certainly part of Hydra’s plan,” Loki mused. “Release offrealm technology to Midgardian criminals, and by doing so, drastically increase chaos and civil unrest.”

“How do you know?” Tony asked suspiciously.

Loki smirked. “Because it’s what I would do.”

Clint made a choking noise, and Darcy laughed. Bruce shook his head. “Don’t encourage him.”

“I’d bet our black-market dealer is Thanos’ contact,” Tony said darkly.

Clint frowned, levity gone. “There’s plenty of people in SHIELD who aren’t Hydra. Could be one of those.”

“Yeah, but of the higher-ups?” Tony asked. “We know Pierce is involved. Fury might be; we don’t know yet. That’s it. They’re at the top of the totem pole. They’ve got the authority to do pretty much whatever they want, and honestly, a Hydra person is way more likely to be Thanos’ lackey than otherwise.”

“Because Hydra is evil?” Bruce said.

“Yes,” Clint said. No hesitation.

Bruce traced abstract shapes on the table. “It’s dangerous to make a blanket statement like that,” he warned. “To assume that membership with an organization automatically makes someone ‘evil’. That’s the kind of hate that breeds genocides. Civil wars.”

“That’s all well and good for civilians,” Clint said. “Scholars, noncombatants, philosophers. Spies, soldiers, we can’t hesitate.”

“Don’t fall into that trap,” Bruce said.

Clint sat forward, palms braced on the table.

“Guys,” Darcy said. “Maybe not right now? Clint, you’re tense about Natasha, but chill out, she can handle herself. Bruce, you’ve got a point, but I tend to think we can take a few Hydra lives for the sake of getting rid of that fucking organization for good.”

Clint exhaled sharply through his nose and sat back in his seat again. Bruce got his heart rate under...
control and focused on grounding himself.

“The point remains that a Hydra agent would necessarily possess a predilection for sacrificing lives in exchange for their own version of ‘good,’” Loki said, his voice perfectly even as always. Perfectly controlled. Bruce resisted the urge to demand he be kicked out of the meeting. “It appears that Hydra’s goal is to create a world order in which Midgardians sacrifice their liberties at the altar of global stability, allowing themselves to be controlled. Thanos would quite possibly permit a small portion of humanity to survive, beneath his control, as a slave population extracting resources from Midgard for his own use.”

Tony squinted at him. “Excuse me, but why do you care?”

Loki raised his head, and Bruce flinched slightly at the terrifying, ice-cold rage that looked out of the Asgardian’s eyes. “I have a vested interest in ensuring that Thanos’ plans are disrupted in any way possible. And I will ally with whomever I must to achieve that end. Including Midgardians who loathe me.” He shrugged. “Also, I’m bored.”

Darcy made a noise that sounded suspiciously like choking on laughter.

“Maria?” Bruce said, hoping to derail this before the tension got too much and these volatile people set each other off.

Clint’s face shuttered.

Tony tapped the table. “Still unconscious.”

“So we’re still stuck,” Bruce said. “Fantastic. I’m going back to the lab.”

He made it halfway across the penthouse.

“Dr. Banner, I believe you may wish to stay,” JARVIS said. “I have just been notified that Director Fury is on his way and expects you all to be present. He will arrive in ten minutes.”

“Out,” Darcy said to Loki.

He cocked his head. “I could impersonate Dr. Foster.”

“No,” Tony said. “Fury’s worked with her; he might notice. And there’s no need. Just go upstairs and stay out of the way. Turn yourself into a coatrack or something if anyone comes poking around.”

“As you will,” Loki said indifferently, and left the room.

Bruce returned to the table. “What does he want? And why now, of all the times?”

“I have not been informed of Director Fury’s objective,” JARVIS said.

Darcy whipped out her tablet. “It’s definitely weird that he’s showing up while SHIELD is conducting a manhunt for Captain America. I’m going to message Maria so if she wakes up she knows to stay hidden. JARVIS, can you make sure the safe room’s locked up tight?”

“The door has been sealed, Miss Lewis,” JARVIS said.

“Thanks.”

“I need to go check on that last test,” Bruce said.
Tony frowned. “Have you been copying all your results to an off-network server or drive or anything?”

“Most of it,” Bruce said.

“JARVIS, copy all our data somewhere and hide it so it looks like it’s part of your subdirectives,” Tony said.

“Do you think Fury’ll force us to give up our results?” Bruce asked, brows furrowing. The first trickles of anger began to escape and he mentally focused on control, measured breathing, clearing his mind. The anger never went away, but he could manage it. He had to.

Tony shrugged. “I hope not. But it can’t hurt.”

“True.” Bruce decided he needed hot chocolate or something soothing and headed for the kitchenette, Fury be damned. Once upon a time, he’d respected Fury enough to not be cooking during the man’s arrival, but those times were long gone.
Tony hid his hands behind his back so his white-knuckled grip on his StarkPhone wouldn’t give away his tension. He had a sneaking suspicion that Fury was about to waltz in here and demand the scepter back, and he was not happy about it. So far, he’d discovered two new elements and found trace evidence of three more, Bruce was finding some really interesting things from its effects on neural tissue, and Jane was doing something that Tony did not fully understand and hadn’t had the time to research, but she said it could be groundbreaking. There was no way Fury was just going to demand it back. SHIELD had no jurisdiction.

“Director Fury is on final approach,” JARVIS warned.

“You done copying those files?”

“Three mintes twenty-one seconds remaining.”

“Gah,” Tony muttered. “What did I install those superprocessors for then?”

“Allowing me to run this tower on an automated system,” JARVIS said.

Tony grinned. “Right.”

The sound of the chopper separated from the constant background hum of the city, and Tony saw it coming in for landing on his pad. This one was bigger, a Chinook, and armored, with several gun turrets.

“JARVIS, get the Mark 7 on standby,” he said.

Clint shot him a look and then glanced at the pantry, where Tony knew he and Natasha had a weapons cache.

Fury was the first one out of the helicopter. He was followed by Rumlow and an entire STRIKE team.

“Fuck,” Darcy hissed.

Clint stood instantly.

“No,” Darcy said. “Clint, stop–they’ll see if you go for weapons now, don’t let this escalate–”

“Fine,” Clint said, practically vibrating with tension. Tony read the hatred on his face and wondered what exactly Rumlow had done to earn it. Or maybe it was directed at Fury. Hard to tell these days.

The doors hissed open. Fury marched in and his goons followed, guns disengaged and pointing at the floor but still threatening. Tony didn’t like being threatened in general and especially not in his own home. His place of safety. He narrowed his eyes, squared his shoulders, and turned up the charisma. He knew exactly how to make his presence fill up a room.

“Pretty sure I never gave you permission to march a STRIKE team in my tower,” he snapped.
Fury glared back. “You have no jurisdiction to say otherwise, Mr. Stark. You’re skating on thin ice here.”

“Oh, yes I do,” Tony fired back. “We’ve cooperated, shared our results, done as you asked, and yet you still feel the need to negotiate with guns at hand. Something tells me you don’t trust us.”

“Maybe that’s because one of you just broke out of the Triskelion and is wanted for treason,” Fury snarled.

“Rogers’ choices are his own,” Tony said. “Is anyone in this room wanted for treason with him? Aiding and abetting? Is there a stronger phrase specifically for helping traitors? Seems like there should be.”

“No,” Fury said stiffly. “As far as we can tell, you’re not involved.”

“Then get them out of my house,” Tony said. “Or I am done working with you.”

Darcy’s face was inscrutable, her hazel eyes flicking over the faces of everyone in the room, measuring, calculating. Tony hoped Fury would underestimate her as Tony himself once had. That would be entertaining.

“Fine,” Fury said at last. “Rumlow, back to the chopper.”

“Yes, sir,” Rumlow barked, and signalled his team. They trooped back out of the penthouse and piled back into the chopper while Tony savored his satisfaction. Score one, the Avengers.

“I am curious why you’re here,” Bruce said mildly. “Soldiers aside. I was under the impression that the situation in DC was taking most of your time.”

“It was,” Fury said tersely. “I’m here on another matter. It’s time you returned the scepter to SHIELD.”

Darcy drew breath to speak, but Tony talked over her. “Nope.” He wasn’t going to let this happen.

“I’m afraid that you don’t have a choice, Mr. Stark,” Fury said. “You’ll return the scepter to SHIELD, or I will be authorized to order Rumlow to retrieve it, and use maximum force to do so. You and everyone else who gets in the way will be charged with failure to cooperate with a federal agency, theft of government property, and obstruction of justice. Possibly treason, depending on the mood of the judge.”

“You have no jurisdiction,” Tony said.

“Actually, he does,” Darcy said, standing and walking toward them. Something in her body language said gearing up for a fight. “US government sends in the SHIELD goons to clean up weird messes like New York, and SHIELD’s responsible for handling all the weird shit like Chitauri bodies and scepters belonging to megalomaniacs from outer space. It’s technically only here on loan.”

“Thank you, Miss Lewis,” Fury bit out, and turned back to glare at Tony. “So. What’ll it be, Mr. Stark?”

“I’m not letting you take that scepter,” Tony said, stepping forward.

Darcy got in his way. “What he means to say is that the lab equipment is very sensitive and Dr. Banner will go right now to retrieve the scepter so that nothing gets damaged. Bruce?”
She looked to Bruce, and for a long second Tony hoped his fellow scientist would back him up, but then Bruce sighed and headed for the elevator.

Tony’s fists clenched.

Darcy’s hand on his bicep tightened until her grip was painful. “Do not fight this,” she hissed in his ear.

The list of potential charges rang in Tony’s ears, and he glowered at Fury, who glared right back. But he didn’t move, not when Bruce came back in with the scepter in a long case for transport, not when Fury walked out the door with the damn thing, and not when the chopper took off.

Only when it was out of sight did he turn on Darcy. “What’d you do that for?” he snapped. “You let him take it—”

“You didn’t give me much of a choice!” she shouted right back.

Tony backed up a step. She was way angrier than he’d expected.

“You went in there guns blazing and stonewalled him at the first volley,” she continued, poking him in the chest to make her point. Eyes blazing, shoulders squared, unfazed by the fact that she had to tip her head back to meet Tony’s eyes. “What did you think he was gonna do, apologize and take off? You give Fury a wall and his first instinct is to smash it, no matter that it might be easier to go over or around. I could’ve at least tried to talk him out of it, but the second you talked over me and flat-out refused, there was no way in hell he was walking out without that damn scepter. I had to let him have it or we’d all be on the floor in handcuffs right now!”

Ringing silence followed her words.

Tony looked away. He’d fucked up. Let them all down. Again.

“I’m sorry,” he gritted out.

Clint sat straight upright. “Do my ears deceive me, or did Tony Stark just apologize for something?”

“Don’t panic, I regret it already,” Tony growled. He closed his eyes and desperately tried to control himself. He couldn’t let himself be weak like this in front of people who relied on him, not after he’d let them down. Guilt and shame snarled into a toxic sludge and made him nauseous.

“Tony.”

He looked up.

Most of the anger had drained out of Darcy’s face. “Undeserved guilt is a symptom of PTSD,” she said bluntly. “Okay, you screwed up. We still have data to work with and it’s not the end of the world. Everyone in here has messed up at some point. I lost an entire set of readings from some anomaly in California two years ago. Jane forgave me. We don’t hate you. Just… work with me more in the future.”

Tony nodded. Breathed. Coped the only way he knew, by pushing everything aside and donning the Obnoxious Playboy facade he’d carefully cultivated for years.

“This day has just gone all to shit,” he said. “Anybody want a drink?”
Clint dropped his head into his hands. "Is anyone on this team *not* dysfunctional?"

"I don't know what would ever have made you think otherwise," Darcy said, throwing herself onto the sofa.

Tony reached for a drink and tried not to think about how much he loved these people. What he'd do to not let them down again.
“Got the number?” Natasha asked.

“Haven’t lost it since the last time you asked.” She couldn’t tell, through the earpiece, if Sam sounded annoyed, but based on his words it seemed likely.

“Just checking.”

“He’s coming,” Steve said. “Nat?”

“In position,” she said, readying her rifle. The laser sight was entirely unnecessary, but it would allow her to intimidate Sitwell.

Next to her, Zima shifted. “We should be down there,” he said quietly.

Natasha muted her earpiece. “Sitwell can’t know we’re working with Steve.”

Zima frowned, but said nothing else.

Natasha returned to watching the steps through her scope.

The doors opened, and there was Sitwell, bald as a cue ball. If a cue ball could make that smug, complacent face.

“Turning on the mike,” Steve said.

A second later, his directional microphone clicked on and the other man’s voice crackled through the earpieces.

“...she’s killing my back. Look, this isn’t the place to talk about it.” The older man reached out and touched Sitwell’s lapel. “That’s a nice pin.”

What?

“Thank you,” Sitwell said.

Natasha lifted her scope and focused on their faces.

“Come here,” the older man said. He and Sitwell embraced. Natasha thought she saw the older man’s lips move by Sitwell’s ear. Indecipherable crackling came through her earpiece.

“What was that? Comms didn’t pick it up,” Sam said.

Steve’s voice was grim. “He said ‘Hail Hydra.’”

“So it’s real,” Natasha said. Anger and bitterness clouded her vision for a second before she reeled herself back in.

“Guess so,” Sam said grimly.
They watched Sitwell’s new friend walk away.

“Dialing,” Sam said.

Natasha positioned her finger over the laser sight switch. This was the dangerous part, the part they had the least control over. An observant guard could ruin the whole game.

Sitwell glanced down at his phone. Thanks to Tony’s genius, he’d see a call from Pierce.

“I need a minute,” he told the three men guarding him. “Bring the car around.”

All three walked away.

“Idiot,” Zima muttered, and Natasha grinned.

“Yes, sir,” Sitwell said.

“Agent Sitwell, how was lunch?” Sam said. “I hear the crab cakes here are delicious.”

Sitwell stood up straight, tense. “Who is this?”

“The good-looking guy in the sunglasses, your ten o’clock,” Sam said from his spot at the cafe.

Sitwell turned the wrong way.

Natasha rolled her eyes.

“Your other ten o’clock,” Sam added, his scorn echoing through the line.

Sitwell turned again, eyes landing on the cafe seating. Sam raised a hand in a casual wave.

“What do you want?” Sitwell snapped.

“You’re gonna go around the corner, to your right. There’s a grey car, two spaces down. You and I are gonna take a ride.”

Sitwell smirked. “And why would I do that?”

Natasha flicked on the laser sight and centered it over his chest.

“Because that tie looks really expensive, and I’d hate to mess it up,” Sam said.

Sitwell looked down and swallowed.

“He’s having too much fun with this,” Zima muttered.

Natasha looked away from the road briefly. “Who? Sam?”

“Yeah,” Zima said.

“He’s just getting back in the game,” Natasha said. “And he knows enough to have a problem with Sitwell. Not surprising he’s enjoying taking Sitwell down.”

Zima glared at the gray car three spaces ahead, waiting for the light to change. Sam was sitting in the back with the cuffed Sitwell while Steve drove.
“Are you jealous?” Natasha asked.

Zima’s eyes cut to her for less than a second.

“You are,” she said. “Zima. Do you remember him?”


“Oh, Zima,” she said softly, and reached over for his hand. Sadness briefly washed away her anger. He was her Zima, her Soldier, and she loved him, and she hated seeing him in this struggle. “I wish I could help.”

“You are,” Zima said.

She squeezed his hand. They lapsed into silence.

Natasha considered. She knew Zima. Knew how he thought, how he was dealing, what he’d be most worried about.

The struggle for identity. It was tearing him apart, and… and he’d probably be hesitant to talk to her about it, because Natasha knew she was the only person on the planet he trusted completely, and he’d be afraid that she would leave if he was someone else.

“You can be both Bucky and Zima,” she said. “People can choose what to do with what they are. I will love you either way.”

Zima’s head dipped a bit, and he nodded. “Thank you,” he said, almost too softly to hear.

[Classified Location]//Rooftop, Washington D.C.

September 2011

Steve shoved Sitwell out onto the roof and dragged him toward its edge.

“Tell me about Zola’s algorithm,” he demanded.

Sitwell staggered backward and landed against the low railing. “Never heard of it.”

“What were you doing on the Lemurian Star?”

“Throwing up,” Sitwell said, that smug look still on his face. “I get seasick.”

Steve shoved him back. Sitwell almost lost his balance.

“You’re not going to shove me off,” the SHIELD agent said with a smile. “It’s not your style.”

Steve shrugged. “I’m branching out,” he said, and shoved Sitwell off the roof.

Four seconds later, Sam burst back up over the edge carrying Sitwell by the leg, his wings spreading wide against the sun.

He tossed Sitwell into the gravel on the rooftop and came in for a perfectly smooth landing.

Steve advanced on him, squaring his shoulders and imagining that he was about to get in a fight.
It worked. Sitwell scrambled backwards, raised his hands. “Zola’s algorithm is a program… for choosing Insight’s targets!”

Sam jerked his elbows and the wings collapsed into his pack. He drew a pistol and twirled it around his fingers. “What targets?”

“You! A TV anchor in Cairo, the Undersecretary of Defense, a high school valedictorian in Iowa City. Bruce Banner, Stephen Strange, anyone who’s a threat to Hydra! Now, or in the future.”

Steve’s fists clenched. “In the future? How can it know?”

Sitwell laughed hysterically. Sweat gleamed on his bald head. “How could it not? This century is a digital book. Zola taught us how to read it. Bank records, medical histories, voting patterns, emails, phone calls, your damn SAT scores—Zola’s algorithm evaluates peoples’ pasts to predict their futures.”


“Then what?” he asked.

Sitwell opened his mouth. His eyes widened and he collapsed back. “Oh my God… Pierce is going to kill me.”

“What then?” Sam snapped, stepping forward.

Sitwell glared at him defiantly. “Then the Insight helicarriers scratch people off the list. A few million at a time.”

Steve and Sam shared a horrified look.


“Rumlow’s working with Pierce,” Sitwell said. “I don’t know about Fury.”
“Insight’s launching in sixteen hours. We’re cutting it a little close here.”

Even the earpiece wasn’t enough to disguise the tension in Romanoff’s voice. Sam glared across the backseat of the car at Sitwell.

“I know,” Steve said from the front. “We’ll use our new friend to bypass the DNA scans and access the helicarriers, shut them down.”

“This is a terrible plan,” Sitwell insisted.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Yeah, of course you’d say that.”

“Who are you working with?” Sitwell demanded. “Who are you talking to?”

“No one you’d want to meet,” Sam said.

“Ouch,” Romanoff said. Sam snickered.

Something slammed into the roof of the car.

“What the–”

Bullets tore through the roof and backseat. Sitwell slumped.

“Steve!” Sam shouted, reaching for the SHIELD agent, but the man was already dead.

He lunged forward, twisting into the front seats and shoving Steve out of the way just as more gunfire shattered the steering column.

“Brake,” Steve got out.

Sam reached underneath himself and yanked up the parking brake.

The car squealed and shuddered and spun. A body flew off the roof and landed and rolled impossibly on the concrete.

Sam was dimly aware that Romanoff was shouting in his ear about what is happening, what’s going on, talk to me Steve.

A massive impact rocked the vehicle and it flipped.

“Hang on!” Steve shouted, grabbed Sam’s bicep, and slammed them into the door.

It fell away. They dropped for a terrifying half second before the door hit the pavement and they began to slide. Horns blared and metal screeched. Their car, with Sitwell’s body, slid into the barrier and flipped over, off the road.
Their attacker was two hundred meters away but closing fast.

Sam groaned and got to his feet.

“Romanoff, stay back!” he got out. “You show your face, we all go down! It’s one guy!”

“It’s Rumlow,” Steve said grimly. “And he’s been enhanced.”

Sam glanced at Rumlow, took in the speed he was moving, and realized Steve was right.

Gunfire barked. Pavement fractured and shrapnel stung Sam’s calves. He and Steve sprinted back the way they’d come along the overpass. Hydra agents in tac gear poured out of several vehicles surrounding them and opened fire. Sam dove behind a parked car and ducked down behind its engine for cover, Steve beside him.

“I’m coming in,” Romanoff said.

“Natasha—”

Steve didn’t get to finish. Bullets ricocheted up under the car and into the barrier behind them. Sam sprinted to the side. Around a car and straight into one of the Hydra grunts.

Sam launched himself forward, shoving the agent’s rifle up and away with one hand and swinging a punch with the other. He knew this body armor, knew its joints and weak places, and he hit a soft spot over the agent’s ribcage dead on. The agent grunted. Sam wrested the gun away, threw it behind himself, took a punch to his kidney and fought through the pain. He landed an overhead chop where the agent’s neck met his shoulder and kneed the man in the face as he went down.

Panting, Sam rolled the body off the overpass, grabbed his rifle, reassessed.

There was Steve, down below, ducking behind a concrete divider while automatic fire shredded cars around him. His shield was twenty feet away and completely exposed. Two men held the overpass and laid down cover fire for three others rappelling down to street level. Sam couldn’t see Romanoff or Barnes. Or Rumlow.

*Street Fight, Washington, D.C.*

*September 2011*

“Stay here!” Natasha shouted.

Zima opened his mouth, but she was already gone, out the driver’s side and bolting down the pavement.

His voice came through her earpiece. Private channel. “Pauk—”

“They can’t see you,” she insisted.

“I know. Be careful.”

“I love you,” she told him.

“You too.”
Natasha slipped between several cars, looking for her friends.

The Hydra agents were circling a set of cars pressed up against the side of the overpass. Rumlow was directing them, shouting orders. Natasha’s lips pulled back from her teeth.

They had Sam and Steve pinned down back there.

She launched herself around a corner and straight at Rumlow.

He moved inhumanly quickly and dodged her blade.

Natasha rebounded off another car and dodged out of sight.

She heard Rumlow’s steps and slid carefully away, moving out of sight but drawing him away from the firefight.

“Come out, Widow,” he said. “Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”

Chapter End Notes

I decided that this morning’s chapter was pretty short. I've added another section to it, and I'm posting a third one here because I've been on a roll this week and I've written way ahead of what's been published and I'm really overexcited. Ha. (Also I want fewer chapters on this thing because it's getting hella long.) Thanks to all the commenters!
Chapter 76

Street Fight, Washington, D.C.

September 2011

Steve hunkered behind his cover. His shield was right there, but with two people up on the roof, he had no way to get to it without being shredded.

Another burst of gunfire had him ducking his head reflexively, but then the hail of bullets cut in half. Steve tensed, ready to run.

Gunfire again, then—nothing.

“Steve, go!” Sam shouted in his ear, and Steve bolted without hesitation.

Bullets followed, but he saw at a glance that they were firing while hanging from rappelling lines, and their accuracy was shit. Steve dove, rolled, came up with his shield, and smiled.

Now he was back in business.

He turned and charged the base of the overpass.

Street Fight, Washington, D.C.

September 2011

Natasha’d seen Rumlow before. Around the old HQ and the Triskelion. There was something off about him. Too smooth and controlled in his movements. Inhumanly fast.

Enhanced. SHIELD had enhanced him too.

She smiled a bit and crept between cars, maneuvering carefully into position. A challenge. How kind of the Director.

Natasha steadied herself and flew out from behind her cover.

She took Rumlow out at the knees, got a grip on his tac armor, and launched him over the edge of the road.

His hand lashed out as he started to fall and caught her arm. Dragged her along.

Natasha twisted in midair. Didn’t bother scrambling for the edge; it was too late already. Broke his fingers, tore away, and kicked off from the edge of the overpass right before she fell past it.

The ground rushed at her face.

She barely twisted, rolled, popped up in a dead sprint. Rumlow’d fallen on a bus with a crunch. He still had a rifle hooked to his gear. She heard him open fire.

“Get out of the way! Move!” she screamed. Pedestrians shrieked and bolted like frightened sheep but at least they wouldn’t get caught in the crossfire.
Natasha looked back once, smirking, and vanished into the chaos of abandoned cars on the road.

*Street Fight, Washington, D.C.*

*September 2011*

Sam leaned over the edge of the overpass. Three Hydra guys, almost to the ground. Steve was still fifty feet away and closing. Accuracy of the agents was shit but Steve’s shield was up and bullets sparked off of it.

Sam raised his rifle. Fired one quick burst, then another. Wondered at how easy, how familiar, the gun felt tucked into his shoulder.

*Take the soldier out of the fight, but you can’t take the fight out of the soldier*, he thought grimly, and fired again. One of the agents shouted and flinched. Shoulder shot. Damn. They were moving too much on the ropes.

They’d be on the ground in a sec, and stable.

Pain burst to life in Sam’s side. He shouted and ducked down with a wince. He was pinned down again. More Hydra agents, from where he didn’t know, advancing up both sides of the overpass.

He spun left, between two cars, and ducked down. There—a pair of combat boots thirty feet away. Sam twisted into an awkward angle, wishing furiously for his Falcon suit, and pulled the trigger. He was horribly inaccurate but at least one bullet found its mark; the agent went down with crumpled shins and an audible scream. Sam plugged a few more rounds into the agent and fell back.

The windows of the car above Sam exploded with bullets. Alarms wailed all over the overpass. Sam caught a glimpse of a terrified woman hiding in her car and furiously motioned her down with his hand. Her eyes widened and she stared, frozen. Sam realized his hand was covered in blood.

He looked down. A clean injury, straight through his oblique muscles. Not good, but could be worse—it was too far to the side to have hit anything major, and the bullet went cleanly through. Painful, potentially dangerous if he didn’t stop the bleeding soon, but it could be worse. He’d had worse.

Sam listened, figured out where they probably were, looked at the bullet impact sites, and made a guess. There was a lull in the shooting. He ignored the pain in his side, popped up, pulled the trigger, ducked again. The car shuddered and bullets slammed into the metal where his head had just been. Adrenaline flooded Sam’s veins and he was alive again. Fighting. It felt better than he’d expected.

Once more. He jumped up, fired in a different direction, ducked down. He didn’t think he’d hit anyone but he had a better idea where they were now. He’d have a better advantage if he could move without being spotted.

Sam got down on his belly, army crawled under the nearest car, and took off down the row. Boots walked in and out of view behind tires and overturned vehicles. Not wanting to give away his strategy, he breathed and resisted the urge to take them down that way. It wouldn’t work more than once or twice before they caught on and started shooting under the cars as well and he’d lose what little cover he had.

“Sam, more coming! I could use some cover!” Steve said. The comms crackled with interference.
Sam grimaced and whispered into his earpiece, “I’m pinned down up here, gimme a sec!”

“Gotcha,” Steve said tensely.

Sam reached an aisle. Cautiously checked up and down it. Crawled out into the open, rolled over twice, and slid under a car in the next lane. Much better. He was four spots down and about three lanes over from where he’d been in the street-come-parking-lot. Good enough.

Sam jumped up, took aim, squeezed off a quick burst, and triumph rushed his mind when a black-clad figure dropped. The other four he could see whipped around, rifles tracking, but he ducked and moved again. None of them fired. They didn’t know where he was.

_Street Fight, Washington, D.C._

_September 2011_

It had been far too long since she did this.

Natasha was barely aware of the slight smile on her lips as she stalked Rumlow. She’d spent far too much time static, hiding. This would be a good fight.

She knew the instant he heard her. Rumlow’s head snapped up, and his eyes scanned the street slowly, steadily, looking for the source of the sound.

Natasha smiled wider when he took the bait. Rumlow dropped into a crouch and crept between vehicles along the side of the road. An explosion from behind them tugged at Natasha’s awareness but she brushed it off and focused. Her fight was here. Outgunned and unprepared though she was, she would take him down.

Her own voice played on repeat from the recorder, rambling about civilians and backup. Rumlow tensed even more when he made out her words and started moving faster. Natasha followed. Closing in.
Chapter 77

Street Fight, Washington, D.C.

September 2011

Steve gritted his teeth and rolled to the side. His whole body ached. Grenades. Of course they had grenades. And he’d been stupid enough to think that they’d come equipped lightly for fighting unarmed, unarmored targets in a civilian population, and let himself get close enough that the grenade blast slammed him forty feet into a car.

Idiot, he berated himself.

Another burst of gunfire from up on the overpass made him duck, but the bullets weren’t meant for him.

Sam.

There were still rappelling lines hanging from the edge. It’d be a snap to get up there.

But as he bolted for the lines, he caught a flash of movement a few hundred meters down the street. Rumlow. Natasha was probably down there too, and Rumlow’d been enhanced. She could easily be in trouble.

For a frozen second, Steve didn’t know where to go, who to help.

Sam started swearing in a quiet voice, rasping through the comms.

That decided it. Steve slung his shield over his back and started climbing as fast as he could.

Street Fight, Washington, D.C.

September 2011

Sam’s mouth gaped in pain. There was a boot digging into the bullet wound in his side, and unarmored, wounded on the ground, no weapons available, surrounded by three Hydra agents, he didn’t see how he was getting out of this.

“Put him in the truck,” one of the agents said. A blocky guy.

“This asshole killed Terry,” said his buddy, stepping harder on Sam’s wound. He grunted and glared up at them, looking for anything that could help him. He was a soldier, dammit. But none of them had any weaponry below the waist that he could get to.

“He’ll be taken care of,” Blocky said. “Put him in the van.”

Boots muttered something foul but– thank God– stepped off of Sam. “Get up, you piece of shit,” he growled, pointing his rifle at Sam. “Or I blow your arm off and leave it for the Captain to find.”

Sam spat blood in his face.

Someone slammed into Boots and took him to the ground.
Sam instantly flipped over and scrambled aside. A spray of bullets bit the pavement where he’d been lying. He shot to his feet and tackled Blocky before the Hydra guy could fire again, this time at Steve.

The third Hydra agent shouted, slung his rifle aside, and dove at Steve, who was grappling with Boots in between two nearby cars.

Blocky punched Sam in the gut. His mouth gaped for air but he forced his legs to keep moving and deflected the next two blows. Twisted, caught a knee on his thigh, saw an opening, nailed Blocky in the throat with stiffened fingers–one of the few soft joints in the body armor–and staggered back with a heaving chest while Blocky gagged and collapsed.

Someone jogged toward him. Sam flinched and dropped into a ready stance, then relaxed that he saw it was Steve.

“Thanks,” he said with a grin.

Steve nodded brusquely. “Come on. We gotta help Na… tasha…”

Sam followed Steve’s gaze and froze. “Shit,” he muttered.

Steve nodded.

They were surrounded by at least twenty Hydra agents, all of whom aimed automatic rifles at Sam and Steve.

Street Fight, Washington, D.C.

September 2011

“Russian bitch,” Rumlow snarled, clenching his bloody fist. Natasha grinned at him and twirled her knife around her fingers. She’d just slashed open his cheek.

“I’ve been called worse,” she said, and moved.

No fear. No hesitation. Just the brilliant energy of battle singing through her veins.

Rumlow was good, but Natasha was better.

She flipped him into the hood of a car, and before he could move, she slammed a knife into his side and socked him in the jaw.

Rumlow groaned.

Natasha got her knife back from his side and swung for his throat.

Bullets tore into the ground. She dove aside. A round slammed into her shoulder. Pain lanced up and down her body and her right arm fell uselessly to her side.

Natasha rolled and came up crouching to face a thicket of gun barrels.

“Stand down, Agent Romanoff,” someone barked.

Sirens wailed on a nearby street. Local police coming to clean up the mess.
Natasha took in the situation and slowly raised her left arm.
Chapter 78

En Route to SHIELD Holding Facility, Washington, D.C.

September 2011

“They’re both injured,” Steve snapped. “We need a doctor!”

The Hydra agents in the back of the armored transport didn’t move.

Steve glared at them and leaned over to examine Sam’s wound. It was clean, and already sealing; the bullet had passed right through his side. “Minimal damage,” Sam muttered, pressing a hand to it with a wince. “I can still move.”

The transport bumped over a pothole. Natasha hissed in pain and leaned forward.

Sam steadied her while Steve examined the wound. The bullet seemed to have missed her scapula and collarbone, thankfully, but it was bleeding too heavily.

“She’s going to bleed out,” he snapped, glaring at the Hydra agents.

One of them slammed an electric prod into Steve’s gut. He doubled over with a grunt. The shock dissipated, leaving his fingers numb and buzzing.

Another bump came from below the transport.

One of the agents thumped on the front wall. “Drive better, morons!” she shouted.

Steve shook his head. His ears were still ringing a little from the shock prod. They’d upped the voltage on those things, probably after the footage from the elevator fight. He’d have to be more careful about them in the future.

Next to him, Natasha tilted her head slightly. A wrinkle of concentration appeared between her eyebrows.

Steve glanced at her.

She met his eyes, flicked her gaze to the floor, looked back at him, and cocked her head just a bit.

Steve turned a little and and listened.

There was a strange humming sound coming from beneath the floor of the transport.

Sam looked at Steve quizzically.

The humming got louder.

“Settle down,” the male agent barked, and poked his shock prod threateningly in Steve’s direction.

A large, circular opening suddenly appeared in the floor. Steve caught a glimpse of a silver arm and brown hair. He threw himself sideways into the Hydra agents with a grunt. They both shouted and he felt the shock prods nailing him again and again in the ribs and gut and thighs. He reached up and found the woman’s neck with his fingers. The man’s shock prod hit Steve’s ribs, and the woman choked and froze as the shock passed across Steve’s body and into her. But he was enhanced, and
she was not. The electricity proved too much.

Steve reached for the male agent, but with a curse, the man shoved him off and kicked him in the stomach.

A large body hurtled past Steve, slammed into the Hydra agent, and snapped his neck.

Sam helped Steve up. “Come on. We gotta go.”

Steve grinned at Bucky, who was stepping over the body of the Hydra man, and glanced down at the hole in the floor. “How are we getting out of here?”

“I’ve got help. Hop out, lie flat on the ground, next vehicle right behind. Go!” Bucky insisted.

Natasha went first, dropping out feet first without a backwards look. She vanished on the pavement. Sam followed, and then Steve moved into position.

He glanced up at Bucky. “Who’s helping you?”

“Not now,” Bucky said firmly.

Steve frowned, nodded, and slid out of the vehicle.

He lay on the pavement for less than two seconds, disoriented, and then metal slammed into him and Steve rolled with a grunt into a small metal space.

It took a few seconds to get his bearings. They were in the bucket of a massive bulldozer cruising down the road closely behind the armored transport, stuck in New York traffic.

Bucky somersaulted into the space. “Quickly,” he said, and pulled bundles of orange clothing down from the top of the bucket. Sam and Natasha had scrambled off to the side; they took hard hats and orange vests from Bucky and dragged them on over scraped, bloodied, and bruised bodies. Steve examined the reflective strips for a second before following suit.

Bucky started feeling around on the back of the bucket.

“This is old SHIELD strategy,” Natasha said, voice echoing oddly in the confined space. Steve felt horribly exposed and tugged his hard hat lower over his forehead. “These things are ancient. Where-”

“Here,” Bucky said, and a piece of the back of the bucket fell away, leaving a hole just large enough for a medium-sized man. The engine noise got fractionally larger. “Careful on the climb.”

He slipped through the gap and into the guts of the bulldozer.
Chapter 79

En Route to Safe House, Washington, D.C.

September 2011

Sam made Romanoff go before him. She was still bleeding pretty bad. Hopefully Barnes had the forethought to pack medical supplies in this thing. He leaned back and tried to look casual. It was D.C. People had probably seen weirder than a construction worker riding the bucket of a bulldozer.

When he decided he’d given Romanoff enough time to get out of the way—thirty seconds at the most—he shuffled over to the secret door and poked his head through.

Brilliant.

Someone had very cleverly left a gap in the belly of the machine that an athletic person could possibly climb through, with random metal protuberances at irregular intervals that were wrapped in insulating rubber, probably so they didn’t get too hot to touch. The noise and heat were oppressive. Sam wanted earplugs.

He scrambled through, steadied his feet, and shoved the secret door closed. It clicked into place in the bucket. Sam looked down at the pavement visible in patches beneath his feet and started climbing.

It wasn’t far. He saw Natasha ahead of him, almost at what had to be the base of the cabin. The dozer’s shell blocked most of the light, but enough got in around the edges of the bucket and the grille up front that he could make out Steve’s legs, vanishing up into the cabin.

Sam started climbing.

Halfway up, his hand hit something wet. He paused and examined his palm.

The handhold he’d grabbed was covered in blood.

Worried, Sam started climbing faster.

At the base of the cabin, there was a flat hidden compartment, large enough for two men to lie side-by-side on their backs, with hatches in the bottom and top. Sam climbed right past it and up into the passenger compartment of the bulldozer.

A brown-haired woman was driving. The passenger compartment was set down and to her left, and kind of cramped, but Sam guessed it could’ve been worse.

Barnes stepped around him to shut the hatches. The top one fit seamlessly into the floor.

“Where’d you find this thing?” Steve asked Barnes.

The soldier pointed up at the woman driving. “Hill found me trying to get to you guys, told me she slipped out of the Tower to come help and to tail the transport while she dredged this out of storage. She caught up and we pulled a rescue.”

“SHIELD used to modify construction equipment to transport contraband people and materials,” Natasha said. Her face was pale and bloodless.
“Hill?” Sam said.

The driver didn’t answer.

He realized she must not be able to hear him over the engine and climbed the steps to the driver’s booth with her. The ground was at least twelve feet below. The heat and noise of the bulldozer rose around them like a cloud.

The woman squinted at Sam, and he realized he recognized her from TV coverage of the Avengers. “First aid,” he shouted, and pointed down at Romanoff.

Hill glanced down once. Her expression didn’t change, but he saw the awareness of Romanoff’s condition hit her, and she leaned closer. “Under the seat,” she shouted.

Sam nodded, crouched, and spotted the white box caked with grime and stuffed under the driver’s seat. He dragged it out and hopped back down with Barnes and Steve.

“Hope the inside of this thing looks better than the outside,” he said.

Natasha said something.

Sam knelt in front of her. “What was that?”

“Disguised,” she said, pointing at the box.

“Got it.” Sam popped the latches and lifted the lid. His eyebrows rose. The inside was pristine and sterilized. The seal must’ve been perfect on that box.

Barnes stepped forward and started digging in the box. His movements were quick and deft, but Sam noticed a quick tremor in the soldier’s mouth, and moved aside.

The pain in his side suddenly came back. Sam gasped and leaned back against the wall of the passenger compartment, teeth gritted.

Steve was at his side in an instant. “Is it bleeding?”

“Little bit,” Sam said, looking down at his hand. Most of the blood was from the climb. His wound was clotting already.

Steve worked in silence, helping Sam do a field dressing and seal both ends of the bullet hole with clotting powder and glue. It wasn’t as good as a hospital, but their options were limited.

When they were done, Sam dragged himself back up to the driver’s cabin. “Where are we going?” he shouted at Hill. From up here, he saw they’d driven out of downtown D.C. and into a heavily industrialized area.

“Ditch this,” Hill shouted back, “then a safe house.”

Sam nodded and slid back down.

The engine was too loud for conversation, so they just separated to sit around the edges of the passenger compartment. Steve pulled his knees up to his chest and stared at his hands. Barnes sat next to Romanoff, close but not quite touching, something about the tilt of his head suggesting that he was paying very close attention to her. Sam tucked himself into a corner and wondered how he’d fallen in with a group of heroes and legends.
Triskelion, Washington, D.C.

September 2011

The synflesh itched.

Natasha ignored the prickling on her cheekbones, forehead, and jawline. This was the price of impersonation. She was well accustomed to it, but it didn’t get any easier. Just predictable. The blond hair of her wig was a little startling every time it fell in her face.

Natasha sank into her identity as she walked, immersing herself into the persona of Councilwoman Elizabeth Hawley. Mid-fifties, confident, complacent, smug and settled in her position and her authority. Oblivious to the schemes swirling around her, unaware of SHIELD’s growing power.

Hawley’d been the only council member who was both female and close enough to Natasha’s height to make the impersonation work. Luckily, her security hadn’t been very effective. They’d simply taken her in the airport bathroom and swapped her for Natasha while her guards waited outside. She was currently bound and held captive by an old contact of Natasha’s outside D.C. She’d be released in twenty-four hours with no knowledge of who her captors were.

Pierce met the Council members in the lobby. “Welcome to the Triskelion,” he said with an ingratiating smile. “How was your flight?”

“Lovely,” Natasha said, the synthesizer at her throat modulating her voice into an exact replica of Hawley’s. “The ride from the airport less so.”

“Unfortunately, SHIELD cannot control everything,” Pierce said with a smile.

“Including Captain America?” Councilman Rockwell said, a hint of a challenge in his voice.

The rest of the Council paused, waiting on Pierce’s response.

His smile slipped for a fraction of a second before he recovered and simply ignored the query. A soldier stepped forward and handed him a small black case. Pierce removed four lapel pins. “The facility is biometrically controlled,” he explained. “These will give you unrestricted access.”

This could be quite useful, Natasha thought, and delicately clipped the pin to the breast of her suit jacket.

They rode the elevators in a mostly silent group. Hawley was not known for being a talker, so Natasha was able to stay quiet and listen to the occasional inquiries and answers that cropped up between the others.

The doors opened. She followed the group out into the top level of the Triskelion, where Pierce and Fury had their offices.

Steve’s voice sounded in her ears. “And if Fury is there, can you fool him?”

“I have to,” she’d replied, and offered no other answer.

“Where is Director Fury?” Councilman Singh said sharply. “I was under the impression that he was involved in Project Insight as well.”
Natasha registered Fury’s presence right before he answered. “I’m right here, Councilman,” he drawled.

She turned with the rest of the Council members, mimicked their surprise.

There was her once-boss, in his customary leather duster and the signature eye patch. Seeing him here next to his old friend, Natasha wondered for the umpteenth time whether he knew what Pierce was up to. It was entirely possible that he was as much in the dark as the Council.

“I’ve chosen to leave the presenting to my colleague,” Fury said, and gestured to Pierce. “Take it away.”

“Thank you, Nick,” Pierce said, and began walking. “This way, please.”

Natasha had never been in his office in this building. It was even nicer than his space in the old HQ, mainly because of the view. A corner office with bay windows and sleek, modern furniture. It suited Pierce.

“As you know, I’ve invited you all here today to celebrate the launch of Project Insight,” Pierce said, moving toward his desk. A bottle of champagne and seven delicate glasses waited on a table to the side. He began to pour and kept talking. “The most ambitious homeland security initiative ever conceived, much less undertaken. We will be able to eliminate threats before they happen. We will have the capability to kill anyone, anywhere. Terror will cower in its holes, afraid to rear its ugly head. Violent crime will drop. Criminals will no longer dare break out of prison. We will finally have world peace.”

He passed flutes of sparkling champagne around to the Council. Natasha swirled hers and resolved not to drink, in case he’d laced it with something. “I know the road hasn’t been smooth,” Pierce said with a smile, “and some of you would gladly have kicked me out of the car along the way. But here, now, we stand united, ready to usher in a new era of prosperity and safety for seven billion people.

When history looks back on this moment, we will be heroes, and the world will be grateful.”

Pierce raised his glass in a toast. The Council followed suit.

Just as the edge of the flute touched Natasha’s lips, a squeal broke over the intercom.

She concealed a small smile. *They made it.*

*Triskelion, Washington, D.C.*

*September 2011*

Sam flicked off the safety on his Sig and rolled his neck, cracking it.

“Could you not?” Barnes said.

Sam looked him in the eyes and rolled his neck the other way, slower.

Barnes rolled his eyes, the only part of his face visible behind the mask, and looked away again.

Sam grinned.

Up ahead, Steve and Maria were oblivious, creeping along in formation. Steve’s shield was up and
Maria’s gun sights tracked slowly back and forth across the roof. SHIELD had no guards up here, and Tony promised the EMP he’d remotely programmed was capable of setting the cameras on a loop, but you couldn’t be too careful.

Steve waved.

Sam slipped out of their cover with Barnes at his side. His feet fell easily into the soldier’s stalking gait, controlled and quiet. Weapon up, senses tuned.

Maria raised a fist.

Barnes stopped instantly. Sam dropped into a crouch to get a line of sight past Maria and Steve’s bodies. He didn’t see any hostiles.

After a few tense seconds, Maria signalled, and the four of them started moving again.

The door to the radio outpost came into view ahead. There were no windows, but Sam remembered from Maria’s briefing that the inside was lined with real-time projections of the sky around them. The outpost was mainly to act as a liaison between the air traffic control tower and the Triskelion itself.

“Door’s locked,” Maria said quietly.

Barnes frowned. They’d hoped it would be unlocked.

“Plan B. Bust it down?” Steve said.

Sam glanced around and spotted a satellite dish a few feet away. “Is that their dish?” he asked.

“Yes,” Maria said.

Sam drew a silenced pistol and fired three shots at the dish.

“That should draw them out,” he said with a grin.

Barnes surprised him by chuckling.

Sam caught Steve’s surprised look and shrugged. If the dish quit, that should bring them out pretty quickly.

Sure enough, the door slid open seconds later. A SHIELD technician stepped out and froze when presented with three guns in his face.

“Excuse me,” Steve said, stepping past him.

The technician moved out of the way, hands raised and eyes wide.

Maria followed him. Barnes tugged on his sleeve and gloves to make sure his metal arm was fully hidden and slipped in after. Sam glanced around once more, stepped through the door, and pushed it shut.

The two technicians in the room stared at the group, eyes wide and caught between terror and awe. Sam wondered how they must look. Maria was cold-faced but familiar to them, he was a random unknown face, and Barnes was probably flat-out scary.

“Uh. Hi,” Steve said. “I’m going to need your broadcasting equipment.”
The two technicians looked at each other, then back at Steve.

Sam glanced at his watch. They were running up close to the estimate Natasha’d given for how long it would take before the Council got to Pierce’s office.

“What do you need?” the technician on the left said. Sam squinted at his badge. Salah Masih.

Steve shifted his weight. “I need to make a broadcast to the Triskelion.”

“May I?” Masih said, pointing at the console.

Steve paused. Sam knew why; one wrong move would have this guy warning everyone in the building. He cocked his head and went with his gut.

“Go for it,” Sam said.

Masih stepped forward.

“Salah,” hissed his partner. Carl Henriksen.

“Shut up, Carl, it’s Captain America,” Masih said, reaching for the keys.

Barnes moved quickly. “Talk us through what you’re doing,” he said in a gravelly tone, tapping a pistol threateningly against his leg.

Masih glanced up, bit his lip. “Okay. Uh… Keying up the… systems.” He paused so Barnes could look at the screen. Sam glanced over at the screen and saw a list of departments. Henriksen shifted his weight and Sam snapped his attention back to the tall Nordic-looking guy against his wall.

“Selecting all departments and buildings…” Masih muttered.

“Including the executive offices?” Maria asked.

“Yep.” Masih paused. “Agent Hill?”

Maria nodded tightly.

“ Didn’t like death so much?” Masih joked.

Maria smiled faintly. “Not quite.”

Masih nodded slowly, seeming somewhat checked out. “Right… right… uh… Okay. Here we go. Everything’s on the list. Ready, Captain?”

Steve took a breath. “Got a mic?”

“Right there.” Masih pointed to a microphone on a stand.

Steve stepped over and sat down in front of the microphone.

Henriksen lunged forward.

“Freeze!” Sam shouted. He fired a warning shot. Henriksen grabbed a chair and swung it straight for the console in front of Masih.

Barnes launched himself over the console. Body-slammed both Henriksen and the chair away from Masih. They hit the floor and rolled. Maria dropped a knee into Henriksen’s temple. He went limp.
Out cold.

Sam holstered his pistol and looked at Masih. The technician was frozen, eyes wide, staring at his partner on the floor.

Barnes climbed to his feet and glared at Masih. “You gonna try anything?” he growled.

Masih shook his head.

“Back off him,” Steve said. “Let’s get this done. Masih, go.”

“Three… two… one… you’re live,” Masih said.

Steve took a breath and leaned into the mike.
“Attention, all SHIELD agents.” Steve took a deep breath. “This is Steve Rogers. You've heard a lot about me over the last few days. Some of you were even ordered to hunt me down. But I think it's time you know the truth. SHIELD is not what we thought it was, it's been taken over by HYDRA.”

His voice hardened. “Alexander Pierce is their leader. The STRIKE and Insight crew are HYDRA as well. I don't know how many more, but I know they're in the building. They could be standing right next to you. They almost have what they want: absolute control. They shot Maria Hill and it won't end there. If you launch those Helicarriers today, HYDRA will be able to kill anyone that stands in their way, unless we stop them. I know I'm asking a lot, but the price of freedom is high, it always has been, and it's a price I'm willing to pay.” In that, at least, Captain America and Steve Rogers are the same. “And if I'm the only one, then so be it. But I'm willing to bet I'm not.”

Masih pressed a button. “Cut.”

“Have you been practicing that or was that improvised?” Sam asked. “Because damn.”

Steve laughed, grateful for the break in tension. “Bit of both.”

Maria shook her head. “This is why Fury didn’t want to wake you.”

Bucky snapped his head toward her.

“Steve was on ice for months before Fury brought him out of the coma,” Maria explained, already moving on to the next stage of their plan. “Partly because he was forming the Avengers, but partly because he knew he might need a card to play against Romanoff.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes. “Fury intended to betray her.”

“He wanted an insurance policy in case she went off the rails,” Maria corrected, voice cool and collected as always. “Let’s not get hung up on that at the moment. We have bigger problems.”

“True,” Bucky said, but Steve noticed that his old friend’s left hand was in a fist, and made a note to monitor Fury if they found him.

“You good?” Steve asked Maria.

“I got this. Go.” She nodded at the door.

“Masih,” Steve said.

The technician stood up. “Salah.”

“All right,” Steve said. “Salah. Can you stay here and broadcast the appropriate clearances for a helicopter taking off from the roof?”

“Yes, sir,” Salah said with a grin. “Never liked Pierce much anyway.”

Steve glanced at Sam. He'd already noticed that the ex-pararescue’s instincts about people were usually accurate. Sam examined Salah for a few seconds and nodded.
“You sure?” Maria asked Steve quietly. “I can stay here and do it.”

“Better for you to get going,” Steve said. “We’ll be cutting it too close if you don’t.”

Maria sighed through her nose. “Right. Good hunting.”

She vanished into the building.

Salah spun back to his console. “What about Carl?” he asked.

“Ca… oh.” Steve glanced over at the fallen blond man when Sam pointed. He sliced a length of paracord from his belt and bound Carl’s hands and ankles behind his body. “That should hold. I don’t know if he’s Hydra or just too loyal, but don’t let him out unless you have to.”

Salah stared at his friend. “So… it’s true? What you said about Hydra?”

“Unfortunately,” Steve said. “And if we don’t stop it, millions of people will die.”

Salah nodded, eyes wide. “Uh. Good luck, then.”

Sam snorted. “Thanks, man.”

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_Triskelion, Washington, D.C._

_Sep 2011_

“You smug son of a bitch,” Singh snarled at Pierce.

Natasha made sure her reactions were in line with the rest of them: shock, anger, indignation. Inside, she was scornful. These people were so arrogant they’d forgotten the rules of the game. Forgotten how easy it was to be betrayed.

She almost moved then, but it was too soon. There was no way Maria’d be here yet. She had to leave time for Maria to oversee the man in the radio booth, and then she could take control of this room.

She stepped threateningly toward Pierce. “You will end this,” she snapped.

“Oh, will I?” Pierce asked.

Four Hydra agents rushed into the room, guns raised and trained on the Council members.

“Looks like I’ve got the floor,” Pierce said with a smirk.

A fifth soldier rushed into the room. “Sir, SHIELD agents in the control room tried to stop the launch,” he blurted. “And close the bay doors. Launch is still a go–Rumlow’s fine–”

“Stop,” Pierce said in a quiet, furious voice.

The soldier shut up and blanched.

“So your control’s not as perfect as you’d think,” Rockwell sneered. “Hydra’s going to fall, Pierce. I should’ve known you were lying when you told everyone Captain America of all people went rogue.”
Captain America, Natasha thought, amused. They still saw Steve as their idol, their figurehead. Fools.

“Stop this nonsense at once,” Rockwell continued. “I won’t stand—”

Pierce raised his phone and brought his thumb down on its clear surface.

The pin on Rockwell’s lapel blazed up. The scent of charred flesh hit Natasha’s nose right before Rockwell collapsed with hardly a sound.

The rest of the Council members froze.

Idiot, Natasha cursed. Complacent little fool. How could she have been so stupid as to allow a known enemy, a Hydra agent, to put anything on her body?

Her mind raced with ways to neutralize this threat. She had an advantage in that he didn’t know who she was, or what she could do. He had no idea there was a world-class assassin standing five feet away from him. But it wasn’t time yet, and the only sure way to prevent him from burning a hole in her chest meant temporarily taking herself out of play as well. Which meant she needed Maria here.

Which meant she had to wait.
Chapter 82

Above the Triskelion, Washington, D.C.

September 2011

Bucky ran for the helicopter.

Wilson and Steve were gone, Steve carried slung beneath Wilson’s psychotic wingsuit like luggage. They had to get to the helicarriers before Hydra could launch them. Their best option was to disable the bay doors and take out all three aircraft at once.

Bucky examined the controls. These were newer, sleeker designs, more foreign and complicated than the helicopter he’d stolen from the bunker in Russia, or anything else he’d ever flown. But really all he needed was the ignition, the joystick, and the throttle. Everything else was useful but unnecessary.

He turned the ignition chip Maslih had offered from the compartment below his console and felt the engine rumble to life. Powerful. Modern. Hundreds of years of killing expertise and technological advancement had culminated in this airborne murder machine. He smiled, angled the rotors, and opened the throttle up all the way.

With a roar, the helicopter surged off the ground. Sea, land, and sky spun around the windows. Bucky swore under his breath and fought the joystick, which was touchier than he’d thought, and stabilized the heli in midair.

“Got that, Barnes?” Wilson said over their comms.

“I’m fine,” he growled back, and thrust the joystick forward, throwing the heli into a pivot towards the helicarrier bay doors.

“Oh shit, they’re launching!” Steve shouted.

Bucky pushed the throttle farther.

“There’s a firefight down there,” Wilson said. “Steve-”

“Keep going,” Steve said. “Looks like not everyone down there’s Hydra.”

Optimism. Bucky swung around the Triskelion and he took the situation in at a glance. It wouldn’t be enough. Those helicarriers were already well off the ground.

“I’m in position,” Maria said tensely. “I have five minutes before I need to go after Pierce. If those helicarriers reach three thousand feet, they’re live.”

“Five minutes to reprogram billions of dollars of mass-murdering enemy aircraft?” Wilson said. “Fucking fantastic.”

“Drop me on the first one,” Steve ordered.

“I’ve got the east one,” Bucky said. His hand brushed his pocket. There was the chip, remotely programmed by Stark and JARVIS, that would allow Maria control of the helicarriers. Each of them carried four duplicates of the program, as a safeguard in case one of them went down, or some of the chips were damaged.
“Question,” Wilson grunted. Bucky glanced over. The Falcon suit was powering hard to climb at the same rate as the east-most helicarrier. “If they’re all wearing SHIELD gear, how do we know who’s a bad guy?”

“If they’re shooting at you, they’re bad,” Steve said grimly.

“Great,” Wilson muttered.

Bucky tuned them out and banked the helicarrier.

The dorsal gun of the helicarrier he’d chosen popped up and swiveled. Bucky held his breath. If Maslih had betrayed them, if the proper credentials hadn’t been broadcast for his heli…

But the gun didn’t fire.

He tilted the nose farther and accelerated.

Two escorts buzzed past him in formation. Bucky’s hands tensed on the controls, but he didn’t flinch.

They ignored him.

Breathing out, he kept going.

The landing pad on the top of the helicarrier loomed large before him.

At the last second, he threw the heli into a screaming dive. It raced along, rotors less than ten feet from the surface of the helicarrier, swooping beneath the bulging belly of its huge, lumbering cousin.

Bucky used a precious fraction of his attention to figure out how to turn on the radar screen. It popped up in green—which, at least, was familiar—and he could see the escorts converging on him. He’d definitely set off some alarms.

But they were too late. Up ahead, he could see the massive glass bay. It seemed the height of pride to have made a huge section of the hull of a killing airship out of glass, even of the bulletproof variety, but he wasn’t complaining.

Now to hide his invasion.

He eased back imperceptibly on the throttle. The heli slowed a bit, then a bit more. And then the escorts came shrieking around the edge of the hull and opened fire.

Bucky jinked left, right, and down slightly, but he couldn’t go very far south. As expected, they were firing slightly below him to avoid hitting the hull. He shot along feet from the glass. But helicopters were slower than jets, and the escorts were closing in.

Bucky unbuckled his crash harness with one hand, pulling the straps over his tac vest and masked head, and kept steering with the other.

Behind him, one of the escorts fired a missile.

Bucky gritted his teeth, dipped for momentum, and yanked the heli up.

The rotors screamed when they bit into the glass. Fire and shrapnel spun around Bucky but he’d estimated right; the impact shattered the glass like crepe paper and the helicopter’s dying corpse crashed up into the hull.
Machine gun fire tore into the heli’s tail, then engine.

Bucky dove out the pilot’s door and rolled across the windows. Fire and glass shards and bits of superheated metal flew past him at high velocity. He felt something tear through the pads on his thigh. Another piece of shrapnel lodged in his shoulder. Others speckled his hair, arms. Not serious.

His only chance would be if they got so distracted by the helicopter that they didn’t notice the figure of a man escaping into the hull.
Chapter 83

Above the Triskelion, Washington, D.C.

September 2011

Sam twisted. His wings flared. With a grunt, he pulled out of his dive and sped up toward the top deck of the helicarrier. Steve was a dead weight in his arms. The suit wasn’t meant to carry two full-grown men for this long. They’d underestimated the speed at which the helicarriers would ascend. It could be a fatal mistake.

He huffed out a breath of relief when the edge of the helicarrier came into view and threw them forward into a roll. Steve tensed. Sam set go of the supersoldier and flared his wings in the same instant. Their momentum arrested, Steve dropped neatly to the deck and bolted for the nearest door. Sam shot the lock off from midair and soared up into the sky.

“Go for the third helicarrier!” Steve ordered over the comms.

“Barnes, where you at?” Sam said, banking away from the deck. He was a speck. Camouflaged against the bulk of the helicarrier. The second he peeled too far away, the escorts would spot him, and hopefully mistake him for a large bird.

“Lowest helicarrier,” Barnes said.

An explosion and a gout of flame erupted from the belly of a helicarrier to Sam’s left. Glass fell toward the lake below. “You good?”

“Go, Wilson!” Barnes snapped.

Sam rolled his eyes, tucked in his arms, and zipped toward the final helicarrier.

His luck ran out halfway through the journey. Machine guns rattled and tracer fire tore apart the air around him. Sam launched into some of the most extreme evasive maneuvers he’d ever performed. Spinning, diving, throwing himself from barrel rolls to loops to dives until the horizon spun around him like a top and up and down were meaningless.

“Think I–found those bad guys you were–talking about,” he panted, speeding along the side of Barnes’ helicarrier for cover. “Can one of you get to the last ship?”

“I’ll try to find a copter.” Barnes.

Sam took a breath and twisted in the air, turning until he surged up and over the edge of the helicarrier. He had to take out those roof guns or Barnes would never get off the deck.

A rumbling escort jet hovered not thirty feet from Sam’s face.

For one precious heart-stopping second, he was sure he was about to die.

Then he registered that the pilot was waving frantically and pointing at the SHIELD logo on his chest. That he hadn’t opened fire.

“Got friendlies out here,” Sam said, waving at the pilot and launching forward, around the escort. It fired up and lifted higher from the deck, returning fire at the hostile escorts, while Sam folded his wings and sprinted across the surface. Wind bit at his ears.
“Running out of time,” Maria said urgently. “Guys. These things are on a connected network. I’ll get all of them or none. You have to get to the last helicarrier now, or Natasha dies.”

A shuffle and muffled voices came over the comms.

Sam popped grenades off his suit. Pulled the pins. Ran faster.

“Maria!” Steve shouted. “What’s happening?”

An agonizing pause.

Sam aimed.

“You’ve a little more time. Agent Carter’s taking over here,” Maria said.

He threw the grenade at the roof gun, spun, and ducked behind a stationary escort for cover. “What?”

The explosion beat against Sam’s eardrums. He peeked around the nose of the escort. “Barnes, roof gun’s out. You can take off. I’ll try to draw their fire.”

“Copy,” Barnes grunted. “Almost to the deck.”

A new voice joined the conversation. “Carter here. Hill passed on her orders; she’s going after Pierce and Romanoff.”

“We go with it,” Steve ordered. “Bucky, do not lose that mask.”

Sam took a deep breath.

“Over here!” someone shouted.

He barely dodged in time. Bullets slammed into the ground at his feet and pinged off the armor of the escort. Sam jumped straight up, flapped once, and flew straight into the guy who’d pulled the trigger, knocking him out cold.

Six other agents in uniform bolted out of a stairwell nearby. Sam turned so he had a human shield and raised his stolen automatic rifle.

He remembered the pilot who’d given him cover. Hesitated.

One of the agents raised his gun.

Before Sam could fire, three others tackled the outlier. They panted, stood up, saluted him.

Cautiously, he dropped his human shield.

They didn’t shoot.

“We’re the only air support Captain America has,” Sam rapped out, stepping forward. He fell easily back into command mode. As if he’d never left. “Get in your planes. There’s a helicopter taking off from here in a few minutes. It’s gotta reach that helicarrier—” he pointed at the one remaining—“or a lot of people are gonna die. Copy?”

“Yes, sir!” the agents shouted, and ran for the nearest escorts.
Gotta love the army, Sam thought.

Across the deck, a door burst open, and a large masked figure bolted from it. Seconds later, other agents poured out behind him. Hostiles. The helicopters sat two hundred meters away.

Sam launched himself across the deck, three feet above its surface, and raised his pilfered automatic. It was almost impossible to aim while flying like this but the nice thing about automatic weapons was that he could just pull the trigger and spray a massive burst of cover into the group of agents chasing Barnes. Three of them fell instantly. The rest turned and opened fire on Sam.

He twisted, flared his wings to block the barrage. Most of the bullets went wide; a few ricocheted off his wings; one punctured the metal and shot straight between Sam’s legs. He tossed a smoke grenade and flipped out from behind the smoke screen, flying around it in an arc while bullets shredded where he’d been seconds before.

Sam took out four more with his rifle. Noticed Barnes over by the helis. Hesitating.

“Don’t wait for me, Barnes, I’m busy saving your ass!” Sam ordered. The rifle was empty. He spun and dropped onto the remaining three agents. Clubbed one over the head while helicopter rotors spun to life behind him. A bullet smacked into his body armor, thrust him back a step. He dodged an overhead blow, tried to take off, but a Hydra agent grabbed his wing and yanked him back to the ground. Sam went with it and turned the momentum into a twist, plucked a knife from his tac vest, and left it in the man’s throat while he turned and used him as a shield to shoot the last man.

They fell around him in a clot.

Sam turned around. Barnes was gone. The helicopter roared across the open space between the helicopters in a desperate bid for the final helicarrier.

“Approaching three thousand feet,” Carter said tensely.

Sam rolled his aching shoulders. He’d forgotten how tiring flying was. Time to start working out more.

“Steve, find a jet and get off that thing. I’ll draw ‘em off,” he said, and launched himself forward again.
Chapter 84

Triskelion, Washington, D.C.

September 2011

“Don’t try anything,” Pierce said with perverse kindness. “You won’t succeed.”

That’s what you think. But Natasha didn’t move. She had to buy Maria time to take over the helicarriers, and then she could handle Pierce.

Just a few more minutes.

“Do you expect us to help you?” Councilwoman Prescott sneered. Her olive-skinned fingers were so tight around her champagne flute that Natasha half expected it to shatter. “To stand by while you do this?”

Natasha gave the woman an appraising glance. Perhaps they weren’t all spineless limpet people.

“Of course,” Pierce said magnanimously, walking around his desk. The consummate performer. “You are erudite men and women. Pragmatic. You will come to understand that this is best for all of us.”

“And by us, you mean the people on top,” Natasha said, unable to resist though she knew she should stay silent. “The people in this room.”

“Everyone,” he insisted. “Everyone in the world will benefit.”

“Except for the millions who will die,” Singh snapped.

Pierce shrugged. “Have you ever been faced with the trolley problem, Councilman? I’m told it’s a common question given to philosophy students. You are standing by a junction in train tracks. If you do not pull the lever to reroute the train, five people tied to the tracks in its present direction will die. However, should you pull the lever and redirect the train, only one will die—one person tied to the tracks on the alternate route. One life against five. It is only logical to prioritize the minimum loss of life. That is what we have done with Project Insight: we pull the lever, we save billions at the expense of a few million.”

“But you’re killing people not based on where they’re from, but where you think they’ll go,” Natasha said. “You cannot see the future.”

“With our new algorithm, we can,” Pierce said, smiling.

Hawley wouldn’t know about the algorithm. “What algorithm?” Natasha demanded.

Pierce tapped his desk, and its surface lit up. “Written by one of the greatest minds Hydra has ever employed. We use people’s pasts to predict their futures, and eliminate them if they are likely to cause damage to society.”

“Your society,” Singh said, “is not a world in which I want to live. Feel free to kill me for the crime of disagreeing with your new world order. Hypocrite.” He threw his champagne in Pierce’s face.

Pierce raised his phone with a snarl, the first break in his composure Natasha had yet seen.
Singh instantly collapsed in silence as their pins burned holes through their chests.

Prescott glanced at Natasha. She didn’t know what Prescott was to Hawley, or what Hawley was to Prescott, but something in the other woman’s gaze spoke of cool calculation, a marrow-deep pragmatism honed over a lifetime in the brutal arena of global politics. And something else. Prescott knew something was off about Hawley, but she wasn’t talking.

Potential ally. Or threat to be neutralized. Natasha knew she could galvanize the other woman to speak out against Pierce and get a hole burned in her chest if she had to.

In the space of a breath, she decided to gamble on Prescott’s silence.

They looked away from each other.

Prescott didn’t say a word.

Natasha hoped Prescott was simply going along with things to stay alive, not falling for Pierce’s terrible “logic”.

“Anyone else?” Pierce asked.

The remaining Council members looked uneasily at one another and held their silence.

“No. Natasha couldn’t let that thing get in her body. She’d spent enough time in the control of brutal masters; she’d only just gotten Zima back from these people’s control, and she wouldn’t put him through the agony he’d feel if he had to track her down and free her from something more sinister than neural programming. Her mind, at least, she could control.

It was time to make her move. No guards in the room, and Pierce already logged into the computer on the other side of the glass. Maria would just have to hurry.

In one swift motion, Natasha kicked the phone out of Pierce’s hand and nailed a pressure point that deadened both his arms. He choked and staggered. Balance compromised. She placed the phone gently to the side, drew a gun from a hidden holster, and pointed it in his very surprised face.

All in less than two seconds.

The remaining Council members froze. Confusion and shock on their faces.

Prescott’s eyes narrowed. It was to her Natasha looked as she reached up and tugged the synflesh away from her face and let cool, refreshing air soothe her irritated skin.

“Hello, Director Pierce,” she said with a sphinxlike smile. “Miss me?”

Prescott’s eyes widened.

To his credit, Pierce recovered quickly. “Agent Romanoff,” he said. “I admit this is a surprise.”

“I’ll treasure the compliment.” She gestured with her head. No amateur pointing-with-the-gun-barrel like they did in movies. “Over by the windows. You can watch my associates take down your helicarriers while I take care of Hydra.”
“Two men cannot singlehandedly bring the pinnacle of military technology to the ground,” Pierce scoffed, but he moved where she told him to, and there was an undeniable nervous sheen to his forehead. “Unless…” Pierce examined the chaos visible outside his window. “Unless your associates number three?” He smiled. “I hear you and the Winter Soldier made quite an impression on my Russian counterparts a few months ago.”

“I’m afraid you are mistaken,” Natasha said smoothly, and walked around the glass, keeping Pierce always in her sights.

There were three Council members left living. Prescott, Black, and Saliba. Prescott was the first to move. “Romanoff,” she said, stepping forward slowly. “How unexpected.”

“My life relies on my ability to remain unpredictable,” Natasha said, fingers flying but gun well within reach. She cocked her head. “Stay where you are, please. I’d prefer not to shoot any of you today.”

“Comforting,” Black snarled. “You’re a rogue agent, Romanoff. Top of SHIELD’s wanted list.”

“Not for much longer,” she said, and smiled at him, attention never straying from Pierce for long. These people were all bluster, and in the end, they’d choose her over Pierce. He was the danger.

“What are you doing?” Black demanded.

Natasha arched a brow at him.

“What is she doing?” Black asked the room at large.

Pierce shifted forward away from the window. “She’s disabling security protocols and dumping all our intel on the Internet.”

Black paled. “You can’t do that!”

“Would you care to bet?” Prescott said, eyes never leaving Natasha. “I would not. It seems Agent Romanoff has the upper hand here, Councilman.”

Her tone was frosty. There was clearly no love lost between the Italian woman and her English counterpart.

“I’m revealing Hydra to the world,” Natasha said.

Pierce moved forward again. She glared at him, and he stopped. “SHIELD, too.”

She didn’t respond. Kept typing. Between the expertise she’d gathered in her long life and Tony’s instruction, most of their firewalls posed little problem, especially since she was working from an executive computer.

“If you do this, none of your past will remain hidden,” Pierce said. “Are you ready for the world to see you as you really are?”

Natasha did not let him see how those words struck her to the core. She did not let her typing slow at all. She’d thought about this. Made her decision. Her months of heroism had been a nice change, but she could not and would not change what she was. She would give up the good public name she’d earned as part of the Avengers if it meant taking this man down.

“Are you?” she asked with a small smile.
Pierce frowned faintly, his last hand having been rebuffed.

She concentrated on the computer.

“That’s an executive command,” he said half a minute later. “It takes two Alpha Level executives. You can force me to stand in front of the retinal scanner, but you’ll still never get past that encryption.”

“Don’t worry,” she breathed, hoping she wasn’t lying, “company’s coming.”

She finished less than a minute later. The only thing left was the executive decryption command.

Natasha picked up the gun. It fit into her hand like an extension of her body. “Over here, Pierce,” she said, and jerked her head at the scanner.

She was relying on two things now. One, that Maria would be on time.

Two, that Nick Fury wouldn’t crash their party.

Pierce stepped up and opened his eyes wide to the beam of blue light that played across his retinas.

“Identity confirmed,” a cool female digitized voice said. “Pierce, Alexander.”

“Out of my way,” Natasha said, pointing at a spot on the floor. Pierce walked to it. Turned to face her.

*Any minute now, Maria.*

The doors hissed open.
Chapter 85

Above the Triskelion, Washington, D.C.

September 2011

Sam banked hard. The Falcon suit shuddered. It was nearing its limits, and honestly, so was Sam. It had been too long since he did this. He was vastly outnumbered, more nimble than his opponents but smaller and slower, and he was saving the big guns for a last-minute escape. He’d need them to burn a hole out of the swarm of escorts.

Enough loyal SHIELD pilots were in the air to give him a reprieve, but not much of one. A trail of jets hung off his toes. He barrel rolled, watched a stream of machine gun fire tear into an escort’s wing, swooped below three jets in formation, raked a few into the first helicarrier’s belly.

“Wilson!” Barnes shouted into the comms.

Sam dove, pulled up, turned, picked out the chopper in the middle of the swarm of escort jets. Barnes was limping through the air. Not far from the last helicarrier, but it wasn’t looking likely that he’d make it.

“Coming,” Sam ground out, and triggered the nitro.

It wasn’t actually nitro, not in cars, but it was the nickname given to this ability of the Falcon suit by all its pilots: a fixed-wing one-direction blast. Whatever way you were pointing when you hit the button, that’s the way you went. Hopefully not into the ground. It worked once per flight and usually resulted in burns on the legs. Sam still had scars from Iraq. But it’d been worth it then, and it would be worth it here.

He screamed forward through the sky. Jets and helicarriers and water and land and sky blurred around him. The vibration shook conscious thoughts away. He gritted his teeth. Forced himself to stay focused. Used his weight to lumberingly swing around a few jets in his way.

The escorts were caught off guard by his sudden burst of speed and floundered, their patterns and coordination momentarily thrown off. Sam and Barnes both took advantage of the disorder. There was a wall of escorts between Barnes and the helicarrier. Sam watched him use his chopper’s guns to carve a small hole, then aim for it with a last burst of speed.

The hole started to shrink.

“Sam, I can’t reach the deck,” Steve panted. “Might have to dive for it.”

“Steve—” Sam broke off. Barnes was almost to the helicarrier. Almost through the gap. But Sam knew flying and he knew air battles and he knew the Winter Soldier wasn’t going to make it without help.

But if he went for Barnes, Steve would go down with his helicarrier.

He could only help one person at a time.

Sam took a breath. Made his choice. “Gotta get Barnes to the last carrier,” he said harshly, and closed the gap.
“Go,” he heard Steve say distantly, and then he was back in the thick of the fight, letting loose with all the firepower he had left in his suit’s reserves.

He had to get Barnes to that carrier, and then he could save Steve Rogers.

Triskelion, Washington, D.C.

September 2011

Natasha tensed.

“Director,” she said slowly.

Nick Fury froze, taking in the bodies on the floor, Pierce at gunpoint, and Prescott, Black, and Saliba off to the side. “Natasha,” he said. “I thought you’d gone to ground.”

“I did,” she said quietly. “Then it came to my attention that I never went straight at all.”

She had a bad feeling about this. No surprise was on Fury’s face.

“You need two Alpha Level clearance members and a password to dump the files online,” he said.

“The password’s new,” Natasha said. She glanced out the window. The helicarriers had to be almost to three thousand feet by now. If they got to minimum altitude and the boys hadn’t replaced all the chips, she had no doubt she would die.

Fury shrugged. “We thought it’d be a good idea to add an extra layer of security.”

“Plan on telling me what it is?” Natasha asked. This was the test. She didn’t have time to torture it out of Pierce.

Fury examined her for a long second. “P17AH4C720.”

Natasha stepped around Pierce, keeping her gun trained on Fury, and found the password prompt box in the bottom corner of the screen. She typed it in one-handed.

A second later, the screen blinked green.

Slowly, she transferred her gun sights to Pierce.

Nick’s eyes flicked over to his old friend.

Something still felt off.

The doors hissed open again, and Maria walked in. She blinked at the bodies and shot Pierce a cool glance that reduced him to no more than pocket lint before her eyes settled on Fury.

“He gave me the password,” Natasha said quietly.

“You died,” Pierce said, his composure cracking briefly. “I saw the autopsy—”

“Death didn’t suit me,” Maria said. “But I’m betting you haven’t bothered to remove my executive clearance from the system. Seeing as I’m dead and gone.” She walked over to the retinal scanner.
The blue beam came to life.

“Identity confirmed,” the computer said. “Hill, Maria. Initiate decryption?”

“Yes,” Maria said firmly.

A progress bar appeared. SHIELD’s supercomputers were fast. Terabytes of data began pouring into the internet.

A choked scream came from behind Natasha. She spun around to see Black collapsing to the floor and Fury with Pierce’s phone in his hand.

Natasha’s fingers twitched toward her own pin.

“Turning your back on a potential hostile, Agent Romanoff?” Fury said. “I could’ve sworn you knew better than that.”
Chapter 86

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Above the Triskelion, Washington, D.C.

September 2011

Steve hadn’t been this exhausted since the Battle of New York.

His muscles ached, he was bleeding in five places, and his suit was torn. His shield arm twinged every time he raised it and he was pretty sure he’d sprained his right ankle. But he had to keep going. Sam was busy getting Bucky safely to the last helicarrier. Bucky would replace the last chip. And they’d succeed.

I can be a hero as Steve Rogers, too.

He sprinted around a corner, shooting out the cameras as he went, as he’d been doing for ten minutes now.

No agents coming.

He took advantage of the reprieve and slumped against the wall. Heart and breathing rates slowed as he recovered. Steve closed his eyes and counted to sixty.

His only chance was to get to the dorsal deck and hijack a chopper or a jet.

Above the Triskelion

September 2011

“You’ve reached three thousand feet!” Agent Carter said tightly. “They’re targeting!”

Bucky sprinted along the catwalk.

“Wilson, I need help,” he said as a Hydra patrol rounded the next corner.

He dove forward beneath their hail of bullets and popped upright directly in front of them. Bucky disabled the first man with a throat chop, took his rifle, and started shooting the rest, using the first agent as a human shield. In close quarters like this, it was a bloodbath. But more were coming. He could get through them but not on time, not alone–

“Barnes, duck!”

He hit the deck instantly.

Gunfire raked the Hydra agents pouring into the open glass-bottomed atrium. Wilson’s wings had plenty of space in here. He swung back over the catwalks.

“Go, I’ve got your back,” he said.
Barnes saluted him once and took off running. Long strides that carried him through a minefield of bodies. Rifle in his right arm. He put a few bullets into anyone still moving as he ran so he didn’t get there only to find hostiles at his back.

Wilson kept fighting. Bucky heard him shooting and the shouts of the Hydra agents getting distracted by the guy in the wingsuit.

The console came into view.

Bucky put on a burst of speed and slammed into its glass casing rather than take the time to come to a stop on his own. The rows of chips slid up into view.

“Five seconds.”

He grabbed the one Maria had shown them on her diagrams, pulled it out, tossed it away, and slammed one of the replacements into its slot.

There was an agonizing pause.

“Did it work?” he demanded, turning.

“Got it!” Carter said triumphantly. He heard the sound of typing over the comms as he started running back and away from the console. “Changing targets…”

This part of the plan had been Wilson’s idea: make the helicarriers target each other. They’d go down in flame.

“I have to do this now or they might be able to take back control,” Carter said urgently. “You guys need to get off those things now.”

“Barnes, get your ass over here!” Wilson shouted.

Bucky picked out the silhouette of his wings against the glass, down by the hole they’d torn coming in.

“Steve—”

Bucky started running.

“Steve, are you out?” Wilson said.

No response.

“Steve!” Bucky said insistently.


Wilson banked aggressively up toward Bucky.

“No, get Steve!” Bucky shouted.

He tried to dodge, but Wilson was too adept with the Falcon suit, and tackled Bucky straight off the catwalk. The wings snapped out and strained to heave their weight toward the hole in the glass.

“I can’t get to him in time,” Wilson growled. “He’d want me to save you.”
They shot through the gap. Broken glass fell around them, and then Wilson pulled to the side, wings pumping desperately. He dove, racing for the edge of the lake, trying to buy time and speed from gravity.

Bucky twisted in his grip. Tried to focus on the helicarrier Steve was still on.

The helicarriers opened fire.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry-not-sorry for the cliffhangers :D Depending on how much I write today, the next update will either be this afternoon or tomorrow morning. Thanks to everyone who's commented!

Also, if anyone's looking for a good Loki/Darcy fic, I've been following "A Few Screws Loose is the New Normal" by Mistakes_and_Experiments on this site. It's got a really original (more than mine, ha) and clever plot and Darcy is *fantastic* in it. Also, you get a heavy dose of Nine Realms politics rather than being centered on Midgard, and magic, and heavily interwoven Norse lore.
“Nick?” Maria said, emotion coloring her voice.

Fury didn’t even look at her. His eyes stayed on Natasha, knowing full well she was the most dangerous person in the room. “Gun down, Agent Romanoff,” he said. “Or I blow a hole in your chest.”

Natasha slowly placed the gun on the floor.

“He won’t do it,” Maria said, walking toward them. “Not to you.”

“Don’t push me,” Fury said angrily. “Stop where you are. Alexander. Stop the file release.”

Maria stopped.

Pierce walked over to the computer and started typing, back to them.

“Why?” Natasha asked. Get him talking. Also, she wanted to know. *Why, Nick, why would you do this, I thought—I wanted to trust you—*


Natasha folded her arms, getting one hand close to the weapon up her left sleeve. She should’ve known better than to trust him. There was only one person in the world she could trust, and he was not standing in front of her.

Well. Perhaps there were others, now.

But Nick Fury was no longer on that list.

Black rage began to fill the hole her one-time affection for him left behind. Natasha did not react well to betrayal.

“Those things lead to death. We can engineer world peace with this. I can sacrifice twenty million people to save seven billion.”

Natasha drew her stings, threw one at Fury, and slapped the other to her own chest.

Electricity erupted from both of the little devices. She had a second to feel the pin on her lapel spark and die before her muscles locked, her pain receptors went off the charts, and she collapsed to the floor.

*Triskelion*

*September 2011*
Maria didn’t waste a second.

Fury went down beneath Natasha’s stingers. Weapons Maria had helped design. The phone fell from his hand. Maria dove for it.

Pierce got there first.

He stood up with the phone in his hand. “Don’t move, or they die,” he said, nodding at the Council members.

For a frozen second, no one moved.

“Look out!” Saliba shouted in Arabic.

Maria looked up. So did Pierce.

Maria’d left her earpiece with Sharon, but obviously, Steve, Sam, and Barnes had been successful. The helicarriers were falling out of the sky, shooting at each other as they went, and one of them was crashing straight for the Triskelion.

“We’ll be going now,” Pierce said, and hooked one hand into the back of Fury’s jacket. He hauled his unconscious friend into the elevator, thumb hovering over the phone. “Ground floor,” he said to the elevator. “Emergency override Pierce alpha one nine. Maximum speed.”

“Atrium. Emergency protocols: Confirmed.”

The doors started to close.

In slow motion, his thumb descended on the phone.

Five gunshots rang out in rapid succession. Maria hit the floor out of reflex and looked down.

Natasha, semiconscious and shaking and unnoticed, had picked up her gun off the floor and gotten off all the shots left in the magazine.

It hit Maria, really hit her, that Natasha was in many ways more than human. Her stingers put people out for anywhere between thirty minutes and two hours. Maria’d tested one once and it had been like getting hit with a truck; she’d been out for almost an hour. And Natasha was functioning after less than five minutes.

“Got Pierce,” Natasha rasped. She tried to force her arms beneath her. Her left elbow buckled and dumped her on the floor.

“Here,” Maria said, and got a grip under Natasha’s arm, hauling the other woman upright.

A ping caught her attention. She looked up. Prescott had stripped off her pin and tossed it aside with a contemptuous look.

“We need a way out of here,” Maria said.

Prescott whipped out a StarkPhone, scanned its screen, and smirked. “I have an escape chopper landing on the roof as we speak. Three levels of staircases?”

“Go,” Maria ordered.

Prescott took Natasha’s other side. With Saliba leading the way, the four of them bolted up the stairs.
as fast as they could. There were no windows, but Maria felt the looming horror of the helicarrier and knew that every heartbeat could be her last. It was eerily silent. In here, any noise the helicarriers made was distant, muffled.

Saliba burst through the roof door. Sunlight blasted down the stairwell.

“Over here!” someone shouted.

Prescott, Maria, and Natasha turned sideways to get out the door. Natasha got her feet underneath her and started taking some of her own weight. The shadow of the helicarrier slid across the hot pavement and Maria was running, dragging Natasha along beside her. The chopper was fired up and already moving. She lunged forward, grabbed the handle by the door, and hung on to Natasha with all her strength. Prescott scrambled into the helicopter on Natasha’s other side.

Maria’s feet left the ground.

She scrambled at the edge of the chopper until her feet found a protuberance to balance on.

Someone took Natasha’s weight and tugged her up into the chopper. It banked hard and the thunder of the rotors grew louder still. It shot forward. Maria dragged herself up and over the edge. Hands were on her shoulders, arms. Her entire body hurt.

The helicarrier missed them by thirty feet and crashed into the Triskelion.

Maria could only hope Sharon had gotten out in time.

Chapter End Notes

I had to write part of his from Maria's perspective, because of the whole Natasha-being-unconscious thing, but... I don't know, it wasn't my favorite experience and just an FYI, I probably won't be repeating it. I don't even want to count how many people's perspectives I'm already juggling and I don't think I can add another one to that list. For the sake of my sanity, or what's left of it, ha. But anyway, hope the resolution of Fury's loyalty (dun dun dunn) is satisfyingly plot-twisty. Don't worry, his role in this story is far from over! (And some other familiar faces will be making appearances... now that we're on to Phase 3 or 4 or whatever it is at this point.) And more Loki/Darcy!! (Including insights into Darcy's past; who's excited?? ME!)

Thanks to my commenters and readers; it means the world that you people enjoy this crazy spiky monster of a fic as much as you do!

OOOH I ALMOST FORGOT: Someone asked me for fic recs in a comment a few chapters ago, and I can't find it now but I left one in the notes this morning and here's another: "Life in Reverse" by Lise. On AO3. It has a crapton of notes and bookmarks and hits and basically every other stat on here (so you may have heard of it before), and it's not complete, but it's a FANTASTIC example of Loki/Avengers fic. Canon compliant up through the first Thor movie; everything after that, including the Avengers, is out. But it's really really good. So if you're looking for other recs, definitely check it out.
Steve didn’t remember ever being this tired.

He should be fighting, he thought. Swimming. But the light was so far away. And… there was something important he was doing, or had to do, or had done, something…

But thinking was so hard. Relaxing was easy. The water was pretty. The light up above him was dancing and beautiful. This was a much nicer experience than the first time he’d…

Died.

The thought was a bolt of lightning that briefly illuminated his mind. Dying. Dead. He was sinking, and he was drowning.

It wasn’t so bad. There was a leftover glow of triumph, success, in his head, and he didn’t know what he’d been doing but he had a sense he’d been done what he had to. That was okay, then.

Debris sank with him, faster than he did, explosions occasionally blurring through the water. Their glows, their shock waves, were all distant. Muffled. Steve’s mind was water like the lake, and his thoughts were sinking too, one by one.

The light got farther away.

Steve Rogers closed his eyes.

…

…

And came violently back to life.

Choking and gasping, fire in his lungs. Steve sat bolt upright, promptly gagged, and turned aside to spit water from his lips. His torso convulsed to expel as much water as possible from his lungs and for a long time that really wasn’t longer than a minute or two, he couldn’t even register his surroundings.

Gradually, his body’s panic wore off, and he blinked. Looked around. Registered that he sat on the edge of the shore of the artificial lake, and across the shining waters were the smoking ruins of both SHIELD and Hydra.

“Steve.”

He turned his head, which felt like it was stuffed with cotton candy.

“Sharon,” he said, then remembered. “Agent Carter.”
“Sharon’s fine.” She was soaking wet, blond hair plastered to her skull and makeup running in dark streaks down her cheeks. Her clothes clung to her body and Steve looked away, embarrassed.

She snorted. “Never seen a woman in a bathing suit, I take it?”


“I’m not offended,” she said.

“You pulled me out?”

“Yeah. I don’t know what Tony’s been feeding you up in that tower, but it felt like hauling a sack of rocks.” She reached behind her. “Oh, and I got this.”

His shield. Steve took it and stared at the familiar surface, paint scarred but metal untouched. “How…”

“I may have overheard Fury and Pierce talking about a secret egress point at water level,” Sharon said. “The building was going to shit and the doors disengaged automatically on all exits. I evacuated everyone I could find on my way out. I heard Wilson and Barnes talking on comms and knew you were still in the helicarrier, so I went after you. The shield was caught on a chunk of insulation. I took a little detour after I pulled you out.”

Steve traced his fingers around the edge and set it aside. “Thank you.” He started to stand and winced.

“I’m pretty sure a few of your ribs cracked when I was doing CPR,” Sharon said. Steve blushed at the thought of her doing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on him and was instantly furious with himself. Sharon had done what was necessary, that was all, and showed no trace of discomfort. “You’ll want to take it easy for a few weeks.”

“A few weeks,” Steve mumbled. “I think I can manage that. I’ll have to go to ground.” He shook off a melancholy regret that he couldn’t get to the Tower yet and straightened despite the pain. “Any word from the others?”

Sharon shook her head. “Wilson and the Soldier were too busy escaping to talk much, and my earpiece shorted out in the water. I don’t know if Romanoff and Hill made it out. They got the files decrypted and released, though. S.H.I.E.L.D.’s done.”

Steve glanced over at her and saw a confused tangle of emotion flash briefly across her face. “Do you regret… helping us?” he asked. And found himself hoping that she didn’t.

“It needed to be done,” Sharon said quietly. “But, you know. S.H.I.E.L.D. was… important to my family. It meant a lot that I could be a part of it.” She looked across the water at the ruins of the Triskelion. “I’ll have to find a new use for my skill set.”


Sharon winced. “I was wondering when you’d figure it out. Yeah. I’m her niece.”

Steve blinked a few times. Tried to wrap his head around this. “Uh. Well. I’m sure Tony has a place at Stark Industries for an ex-S.H.I.E.L.D. agent who also happens to be related to Peggy Carter…”
Sharon smiled a little. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Wait,” Steve said suddenly. “You said… Soldier?”

“Don’t insult me by denying that was the Winter Soldier up there helping Wilson,” Sharon said, an edge to her voice. “I’m not an idiot. Romanoff’s here. Last we heard of her, she and the Winter Soldier took down a posse of SHIELD contacts, who were actually Hydra agents, in Moscow, then vanished. Suddenly she turns up again in your company. It’s not a huge leap to realize her companion’s probably here too.”

Steve pressed his lips together. He wasn’t going to say it. Even if she’d figured out all on her own. He didn’t have to say it. He hated himself for suspecting her, but it was always possible that she had a recorder somewhere, or someone else was watching them, waiting for Steve to incriminate himself.

“I’ll come by the tower sometime,” Sharon said when Steve remained silent. “Have JARVIS on the lookout for me, okay?”

“Deal,” he said, and watched as she walked away and left him by the lakeside.

Chapter End Notes

THE END OF THE CLIFFIES! Mostly. At least now we know everyone's alive. Who were supposed to stay alive, anyway. Plus a few people who our intrepid antiheroes might have hoped would *not* survive, but that's an issue for later chapters. *cackling from the author* I considered leaving you with "Steve Rogers closed his eyes" for a day but then I decided that was too evil, and too short a chapter.
“Miss Lewis?”

Darcy scowled at Loki. “I thought I told you to call me Darcy.”

“My apologies.” He inclined his head. “On Asgard, it is customary to address anyone with whom one has an... undefined relationship with their formal title and surname.”


Loki smiled. “Vividly.”

Darcy snorted. He’d spent a week hung up on the Roman Empire, its rise and fall, the chaos and brilliance and idiocy of its various leaders.

“I rather wish I had come to Midgard more frequently in my youth,” he said. “If only to have seen more of your history with my own eyes.”

“Did you come here often?” she asked, genuinely curious. Maybe Asgardians were the root of more ancient pantheons than just the Norse…

Loki shook his head. “I should not be here now. My kind are not welcome on Midgard.”

Wait a second. “Your kind?” Darcy repeated, turning to look at him fully, her mind briefly drawn away from the meeting she should be in. “We like Asgardians. Well. Like fifty-fifty. Given that you and Thor are our benchmarks.”

Something that could only be panic flashed across Loki’s face. “Ah... I was merely referencing my actions in New York. Humans do not take kindly to those who attempt to subjugate them.”

Darcy narrowed her eyes at him. “I see.” There was something more going on here. She was sure of it. Loki, the God of Lies, had let something slip, and she wasn’t going to squander her advantage by pushing him. He’d only clam up. No, she’d wait and do what she did best: collect the pieces, put them together, and make her move when no one expected it.

“We’d better go in,” she said, and reached for the doors to the common area.

“I’ve made my choice,” Maria was saying. “I’ll stay here as private security. And we’re going to start moving after Hydra bases immediately.”

“I’ve already gotten an offer from the CIA,” Sharon said quietly. “I’ll let you know what I decide.
But I’ll keep your secrets either way.”

Tony glanced at Steve, who nodded once.

“I got a few locations off their files,” Tony said, pulling down a screen and dismissing the question of Sharon’s trustworthiness. “But from what I’ve gathered, they had some kind of last resort program instructed to delete or hide certain files in the event of a mass decryption.” He shook his head. “I was close to getting in already when you goons razed SHIELD to the ground, and I was finding some things that were not in that data dump. But what I did find… I think Pierce was Thanos’ ally.”

Ringing silence filled the room.

“Uh. Sorry. Who’s Thanos?”

Darcy squinted at the guy who’d spoken. Cute, late twenties probably, African American. Pretty built. She noted the way his eyes tightened when he glanced across the table at Bucky. Hmm, some rivalry between Steve’s new friend and his amnesiac old one. That should be interesting.

No one had noticed her yet. Darcy knew how to tone down her presence when she had to, and watching the group interact for a moment, uninterrupted, was valuable. With these new variables in the mix, Barnes and Maria and Wilson about to take a more active role in the Avengers and possibly Sharon as well, she wasn’t sure what the group dynamic was going to do.

Loki touched her shoulder from behind, lightly, and Darcy waved him off impatiently behind her back.

“Thanos,” Steve said heavily, “is the extraterrestrial entity responsible for the invasion of New York last spring.”

“Hold on. That was Loki,” Maria said, leaning forward. “We all saw him. Steve, I was under his control. You expect me to believe—”

“Hear us out, please,” Darcy said, striding into the room. She swatted Loki away, leaving him behind the doors. “We’ve heard from a… credible informant… that Loki was under the control of Thanos via the scepter.”

Maria shook her head. “That’s not possible. This was all Loki’s doing, and if you think otherwise, you’re insane.”

“I’m afraid they must all be mad, in that case,” Loki drawled.

Darcy spun around. “Idiot!” she snapped. “You were supposed to wait!”

“What the fuck -” Maria yelped, leaping to her feet. Her chair hit the floor with a bang.

“I refuse to be relegated to the corridor like a child while you decide my fate,” Loki replied. He planted his feet and met their gazes haughtily, chin raised.

Darcy dropped her forehead into her hand.

“Maria–Maria, please—” Clint reached for Maria’s hand.

She tore it away. “You knew about this—this insanity?” she snapped.

Clint winced. “Uh. Yeah. He’s been here for a while—”
“Three and a half months, actually,” Loki said smoothly. “If we’re being precise.”

“Not helping,” Darcy hissed.

Maria stared at them all. Her incredulous gaze flicked between Tony, Steve, Clint, Bruce, Jane, Natasha, Barnes, and found no ally in any of them. Sam, at least, was confused, but Darcy thanked God he wasn’t shouting and posturing too. Seemed he’d follow Steve’s lead before anyone else’s.

She’d anticipated this. But Loki, the goddamn drama queen, couldn’t just wait and let her do things smoothly.

Fucker.

“Maria. Let us explain,” Steve said, raising his hands.

Maria’s fingers twitched toward her thigh and the pistol strapped there.

“Maria.”

This time, because it was Clint, she listened.

Maria slowly sat back down. “Someone start talking,” she said coldly. “Or I shoot him in the face.”

Loki smiled, raised his hands. “You may try.”

“Please shut up,” Darcy said. “Seriously? For like two minutes?”

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth,” Loki replied.

Darcy elbowed him and walked over to her seat. “That’s ‘pot calling the kettle black’ you’re thinking of. Don’t use idioms until you get them right. And no more talking.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Loki said, smirking, and took the seat next to her.

She looked up and realized everyone was staring at them.

Darcy cleared her throat and plowed on. “So. Maria. Last June, I got a call from a reporter from CNN who’d been bugging me for weeks, but then he said he had important information about a threat coming our way from the always-charming Secretary Ross. I agreed to a quick meet in a cafe down the block, where my new reporter buddy turned out to actually be Loki in disguise. We dragged him back here and struck a deal: he’d tell us the truth of what happened in New York, since things hadn’t seemed quite right, and in exchange, we’d offer him shelter. Like a pet. We almost got him a kennel but went with one of the spare guest suites instead. He’s been living here in secret ever since. Even let Jane and Bruce do some blood work.”

“Which we haven’t actually gotten to test yet,” Bruce said.

Darcy shot him a look.

“But we will soon,” he amended.

“Thanks, Brucie,” Darcy said with a grin. He chuckled and she turned back to Maria. “So yeah. That’s pretty much the whole story in a nutshell.”

“Admirably succinct,” Tony said drily.
“I try,” Darcy said, sitting back in her chair.

Maria frowned. “This is impossible.”

“Maria, in the nicest possible way, you’re not seeing this one clearly,” Darcy said. “We talked about all this last spring. How weird the whole invasion was. Loki being under someone else’s control explains all that. He was fighting it and trying to give us a chance. He gave Selvig the order to build in a fail-safe to the portal. You said yourself you didn’t know how that would’ve been possible under the influence of the scepter.”

Maria’s frown deepened, but she didn’t respond.

Loki leaned forward, hands on the table and turned up in what Darcy recognized as a gesture of openness and sincerity. It was probably very deliberate. Classic negotiation technique: “For what it’s worth, Miss Hill, I apologize for my part in the psychological and physical ordeal you endured.”

“I’m sure,” Maria snapped. She glared around the table. “And you all believe him?”

Sam Wilson raised his hands. “I just got here, don’t look at me.”

“I do,” Steve said steadily.

Clint blew out a breath. “As do I.”

“Yet you kept it a secret.”

“We didn’t want you to have to lie to Fury,” Steve said.

Tony shrugged. “Also, we weren’t totally sure that you were more loyal to us than to him. So there’s that.”

“Seriously, Tony?” Darcy said. “That’s not helpful right now.”

Maria rubbed her forehead. “You expect me to live in the same building as the man who enslaved me. Darcy. You’re insane if you think this will ever happen. I would die before I repeat that experience.” She shuddered. “I won’t forget, and I won’t forgive. What he did is unforgivable. Do you have any idea how horrible it was? To be… unmade.”

Darcy was unnerved, though she made sure not to show it, by the naked pain visible on Maria’s face for a fraction of a second.

“I do.”

Maria twitched and glared at Loki.

He ignored her expression. “I know precisely how it felt. The most intimate violation imaginable, far worse than anything Thanos could have done to the physical. I know precisely what it was to be unmade, and I lived every day under the shadow of not only my own anguish but yours as well, and Selvig’s, and that of every other person whose mind I controlled. You are correct. It should not be forgiven, and I will never forgive he who did it to me, but the blame lies with Thanos of the empty spaces between the realms, not with me.”

Maria didn’t seem to know what to say.

“Good to clear the air,” Tony said. “Maria? Still planning on shooting him, or have we convinced you?”
His nonchalant tone didn’t match the tension visible in his shoulders, in Steve’s jaw. Darcy didn’t know what they would do if Maria tried to shoot Loki. Which side they would choose. Which was a problem, because she knew what side she’d be on, and she had no illusions about her ability to go toe-to-toe with Steve Rogers and Iron Man.

Maria slowly sat back down.

Clint reached for her hand and she pulled away. The archer looked hurt for a bare half second before he tucked the expression away and faced forward again. Darcy noticed, and saw that Natasha did, too. There was some friction they’d have to work out.

“And then there’s Fury,” Bruce said.

The table fell momentarily silent.

“No one knows where he is?” Steve asked.

Natasha shook her head. “He is a brilliant secret-keeper. Between Clint and Maria and myself, we can get some headway on SHIELD’s safe houses, and probably a few of Fury’s as well, but he’s definitely got off-the-grid bolt holes we were never told about. It’s only logical for a man in his position. I know I shot Pierce; I saw him go down with a bullet in his head and two more in his chest. He’s not coming back. I don’t know if I hit Fury, or if he survived the Triskelion’s collapse.”

“I’ve already started on changing security protocols around here,” Tony said. “In a week, we should have things altered enough. He knows our old rules through and through.”

“You think he’d come after us?” Jane asked, frowning. Darcy knew her friend was loathe to believe such a thing of a man she’d counted as an ally. Jane had few allies and fewer friends; this betrayal would cut her to the core.

“Yes.” Maria didn’t hesitate. “Fury’s got a vindictive streak ten miles wide. It’s part of what made him so good at what he did: everyone was afraid to cross him because they knew he’d always be looking for payback. Even years later. And that was for things like leaking the fact of a mission in Yugoslavia to the press, or some crime gang getting in his way overseas. We just took down his entire life. SHIELD, Hydra, gone. His cover, his financial resources, his legitimacy, his ally. And we let the whole world know we did it.” She smiled without humor. “Forget ‘come after us’. Fury won’t rest until he’s got his revenge or he’s dead.”

The words hung in the air for a long moment.

“Natasha?” Steve asked.

She nodded slowly. “That’s an accurate assessment.”

“I agree,” said Clint.


“I’ll have JARVIS running facial recognition on all my piggybacked satellites, but I wouldn’t count on anything,” Tony said. “Fury’s an expert in avoiding surveillance, and I can’t get into the really high-level kind, the satellites that might actually be able to find him, without government help. And since we’re not working with SHIELD anymore, we don’t have that kind of legitimacy.”

“So it’s a waiting game,” Clint said.
Steve nodded, looking unhappy.

“Darcy?” Tony said, changing the subject. “How’s the press handling it?”

She shrugged. “Mostly they haven’t moved on from holy-shit-what-is-happening yet. Most news outlets have like, prepared files and stances on this catastrophe or that bill or whatever, but then something huge comes along and there’s like twenty-four hours where they don’t know what to do except babble about how unprecedented this is and make wild guesses. It’s been less than two days and this is an expose of magnitude that dwarfs Watergate and Clinton’s rape trials and Iran-Contra put together. Give it… eh, probably tomorrow morning they’ll be screaming about how they knew it all along.” She snorted. “Some of them will say this is proof that like the CIA, NSA, FBI, and all those are evil, some will say they knew it all along, some will say it’s a cover-up of a bigger story or an excuse to take out SHIELD or that it was a terrorist attack and the government is trying to hide the fact that we failed to stop it happening.” Darcy caught Loki’s look. “Hey, I’m not saying those things are reasonable, but reasonable isn’t usually a word attached to the media in this fine world.”

Steve pressed his fingers to his temples. “I’m so glad we have you to handle them,” he mumbled.

Darcy smirked at him. “Yeah, I’m pretty much fantastic.”

“In the meantime…” Bruce said.

“Right. While we try and track Fury, I’ll start prepping an assault on this base,” Steve said, pointing at the map Tony still had behind him. “It’s the biggest one we know of, operating on SHIELD’s dime but fully staffed by Hydra.”

“No one’s found the scepter yet, and there’s definitely stuff that wasn’t in that data dump,” Tony continued. “Nor was there any record of the scepter or Chitauri tech actually in the Triskelion, which there would’ve been if it was there because Hydra couldn’t hide much actually in the SHIELD headquarters. This Hydra base should either give us the scepter, or a new lead in tracking down where it actually is.”

Darcy knew what they were doing: talking, focusing Maria and everyone else on this new goal. And it worked. Maria managed to relax a bit as they moved into a discussion of military things, assault patterns and who they could use as support, things she knew but Darcy tuned out of. She was a political creature, not a bang-bang-punching-and-kicking one.

Instead, she focused on Sam Wilson. He was the least predictable variable in this equation; she didn’t know him at all. He was engaged with Steve, Tony, Natasha, and Maria, more talkative than Barnes—who barely said a word—and seemed really straightforward. Open, honest, probably not a good liar. Good steady ballast for all these volatile personalities. He’d be good for Steve, and Darcy thought Barnes could probably use a friend who wasn’t eighty-plus years old. And he’d already managed to help Tony. The bags under Tony’s eyes were at least a little smaller.

Look out, world, Darcy thought with a small smile. We’re coming together, and then we’re coming for you.
Chapter 90

Avengers Tower

September 2011

“Tony! Wait up.”

Tony paused and turned around, still mostly processing the data he’d been working through. There was scientific research Fury had never bothered to share, Hydra bases, crises all over the world that SHIELD had involved themselves in, and the team would be looking to him to sort through the whole mess. JARVIS could only do so much. “What?” he said irritably.

Steve wouldn’t meet his eyes. “I need to talk to you about something.”

“Couldn’t have said it when I was in meeting mode?” Tony said waspishly.

“That’s not something you’d want to hear in front of them.”

That was ominous. Tony still wasn’t completely tuned into this conversation, but a few theories presented themselves while Steve dragged him into a smaller conference room, the foremost being that he was about to get excoriated for losing the scepter to Fury. Guilt and fear made Tony sick. He clung to the numbers and facts and dates in his head.

“Tony…” Steve said, and stopped, brow furrowed.

“Look, Darcy already chewed me out,” Tony said. “I’d as soon not hear it again, because trust me, you can’t possibly be more pissed at me than I am at myself. I won’t let it happen again.”

I refuse.

“What?” Steve looked confused. “Uh. Was she mad at you for the scepter? You know that wasn’t your fault, Fury came in with a whole STRIKE team.”

“That’s not what you meant?” Tony said.

“Of course not,” Steve said. “No, I learned something… well, technically, I saw something. And I need to talk to you about it.”

Oh. Tony returned to piecing together five different studies’ worth of data on advanced thermodynamics.

“It’s about your parents.”

His train of thought crashed and underwent a fiery demise. All consideration of science knocked from his head, Tony stared at Steve.

“What?” he said, voice barely more than a whisper. It was all he could get out.

“I didn’t tell you because the last five days have been… insane,” Steve said. “We were chasing the flash drive, then we were chasing Sitwell, then we were breaking into Fort Meade and planning and executing an assault on the Triskelion of all buildings. And we came home and everyone’s been exhausted and recovering from injuries and trying to make sense of the fact that Hydra’s part of SHIELD and--”
“Tell me,” Tony demanded.

Steve took a deep breath.

Tony’s stomach twisted.

“Your parents’ deaths? I don’t think the crash was an accident. I think Hydra killed them.”

…

…

“What?”

“Hear me out,” Steve said, raising his hands placatingly. Tony registered that he’d stepped forward aggressively and made himself back off. This wasn’t Steve’s fault. Steve was being honest. Tony bit back his fury that Steve had been keeping this a secret, because he knew, he knew, it had been the smart thing to wait, even though he wanted to find his Iron Man suit and punch Steve across the roof of the Tower for not telling him immediately—

With effort, Tony reined himself in. “Talk.”

“Zola showed us a montage of footage,” Steve said quietly. “Newspaper reports, videos, op files, things like that, when he was talking about how Hydra’s been fostering chaos for years.”

“I knew that,” Tony said.

“Yeah, but one of the things he showed us was a scan of a newspaper article.” Steve hesitated. “From December 17th, 1991.”

“The day after the accident,” Tony said, even as he knew Steve was right.

Steve nodded.

Tony closed his eyes. Desperate, shattered, flailing for some solid rock in this maelstrom. For years, he’d missed his parents. Hated himself for the way he treated them, for the fact that he hadn’t said goodbye. Wished he’d had a chance to try and fix things with his dad, once Tony was older and less stupid. Wondered if they were out there somewhere he couldn’t reach, watching him; prayed that if they were watching, they were proud. He’d bottled up all that grief, all the love and anger he’d felt for them, all the guilt and resentment and stupid, desperate hope for validation that had never and now would never come: all of it ignored and pressed down because what use was it to dwell on anger and resentment aimed at a dead person? Or love, because then the grief just got worse?

But here was a target. Here was someone to blame.

And then he found an anchor: hate.

Tony hated Hydra already, to be sure. They’d taken so much from so many people. It deserved to be destroyed utterly, and where Steve had failed seventy years ago, maybe they could succeed as a team. He’d been dedicated, committed, and rock solid in his conviction.

But this.

This made it personal.

And Tony knew himself well enough to know: He loved like few dared imagine, and hated like
fewer could believe.

Hydra would regret leaving Zola alive long enough to show them that headline.
Senate Building, Washington, D.C.

September 2011

“Miss Romanoff, the charges against you have been dropped only because the discovery of Hydra throws all of SHIELD’s decisions into question,” Senator Connolly snapped. “I could have them reinstated at a moment’s notice.”

“I’m sure you could, Senator,” Natasha said in the most polite voice she could muster. Never mind that these blithering idiots were infuriating on so many levels. “But the charges won’t stick.”

“And why is that?” sneered Senator James, flipping her blond hair over her shoulder. “You are a danger to society, by many accounts.”

“I’m an Avenger,” Natasha said simply. “Arrest me if you want for crimes I committed as a brainwashed, traumatized victim of Hydra and KGB human experimentation.” That got a stir from the assembled press; she hid a smile. “I am sure that my files contain records of the psychological and physical torture I endured for years before I managed to escape and join SHIELD.” So that was a bit of a stretch, the escape bit, but they didn’t need to know that. She’d never quite been able to tell Fury everything, for which she was now very grateful. “I thought I was going straight. I believed I was fighting the good fight. I helped Captain America take down SHIELD and Hydra together because that was true justice.”

James shook her head. “Justice involves a trial by a court system, Miss Romanoff.”

“Justice is nothing more than consequences, good or bad, that arise from one’s own actions, Senator James.”

Natasha looked behind her.

Sabina Prescott stood there, lips thin and dark hair pulled back in an elegant chignon. She seemed impervious to the clicking, flashing paparazzi, and nodded respectfully to Natasha.

“I apologize for my tardiness,” Prescott said, looking up at the Senators at the bench. “I was delayed by a traffic accident.”

“You’re perfectly fine,” Senator Alba said. James looked like she’d just been force-fed a raw lemon. Natasha stifled a smile.

“Agent, I will be frank,” James said, ignoring Prescott’s arrival. “There is a growing faction who believe you most properly belong in a prison, not mouthing off on Capitol Hill. If you do not cooperate, it will be very difficult to protect you from that fate.”
“You’re not going to arrest me,” Natasha said confidently.

“And why is that?” James retorted.

Alba shifted. “Hannah, we’re scheduled to begin questioning Mrs. Prescott—”

“She can wait,” James said, eyes never wavering from Natasha.

Natasha just smiled. “It’s fine, Senator.” She leaned forward. Because I’d slaughter anyone you sent. “You’re not going to arrest any of us. Because you need us. This world is vulnerable, and quite frankly, the United States government deserves more blame for not noticing Hydra earlier than we do. You need us here because we see the things you don’t see and fight the enemies you can’t fight.”

Alba sighed heavily. “So you cannot inform us as to the whereabouts of Captain America, or discuss the involvement of Sam Wilson, or furnish us with the identity of the unknown other party who aided you?”

Natasha shrugged. “No comment.”

James looked furious.

Prescott tipped Natasha a barely visible wink.

“You know where to find me,” Natasha said, and left the room.

She called Steve on the way home.

“That was intense,” he commented.

“Nothing I can’t handle. Is Zima there?”


A second later, the screen pulled back to frame both their faces.

“Holding up?” Zima asked.

“Just fine,” Natasha said, smiling affectionately. “You’re both worrying too much. I’m more concerned about the press reaction than those idiots on Capitol Hill.”

“Unfortunately, we’re not doing fantastically on that front,” Steve said. “Darcy just let me know the initial shock’s worn off and people are starting to get upset. Apparently they think it’s our fault Hydra grew inside SHIELD for so long.”

“They should blame the government,” Zima muttered.

“Which was my point today, but I doubt they’ll realize that,” Natasha said. “The bureaucrats are too concerned with winning the next election to take responsibility, and we’re an easy scapegoat.”

Someone yelled something off-screen.

“Darcy says Ross is spearheading the anti-Avengers campaign,” Steve said. He listened another few seconds, and added, “She thinks it’ll die down in a month or three.”
“Guess we better lay low, then,” Natasha said, and laughed, because she knew their plans didn’t involve any kind of relaxation.

Zima smiled at her, small and hesitant, but there. She didn’t show her surprise. He was really getting comfortable. She couldn’t remember the last time she saw him genuinely smile in view of anyone other than her.

Steve rubbed his temple. “I knew the bureaucrats wouldn’t love this, but I thought the rest of the world… normal people… they’d get it.”

Natasha sighed. “You ought to have learned by now that the only consistent thing in this world is the sheeplike idiocy of humans.”
Loki carefully wrapped himself in an illusory spell. It had taken him several weeks to tweak the seidr so that he could fool electronic as well as biological eyes. Human brains were far more gullible than Stark’s artificial neural network, and their cameras could detect a far greater range of wavelengths than human eyes. He had to give them credit for mitigating their physical weaknesses with clever technology.

So short lived, yet so innovative.

Loki had begun to think that Asgardians could learn a thing or two from visiting Midgard. Such long lives made them complacent and sedentary, loathe to change or innovation. Perhaps increased traffic between the two realms would help Asgard as well as Midgard.

He would have to look into that, once he sat on Asgard’s throne.

The doors to the laboratory appeared ahead, and Loki shook off these thoughts. He had plenty of time to plan how he would take Asgard, and what he would do once he succeeded. For now, he was occupied with a more immediate concern: that of ensuring the Avengers had no reason to question his heritage as an Asgardian, brother of Thor.

Banner and Foster were upstairs, Darcy having dragged them out of the lab for food, and Stark was embroiled with Rogers and Hill in a meeting with representatives of the United States government regarding cleanup of Hydra bases. The assault would be the following day, and there was still resistance to the Avengers’ involvement. Loki considered the bureaucrats fools for trying to keep the Avengers out, but it wasn’t his problem and he was confident that Stark could handle it.

For Loki, what mattered most was that the lab would be temporarily empty.

Darcy had insisted that Bruce and Jane spend at least an hour up in the common area eating and relaxing. That meant he had fifty-six minutes remaining.

Loki murmured a spell and twisted his hand in the air. The doors opened.

He smirked and swept through.

It was the work of seconds to track his blood work; he knew from his hours spent down here which computer Banner preferred to use, and which belonged to Foster. While they had watched him levitate small items, cast illusions, and heal himself of minor wounds, Loki had been learning from them how to use Midgardian technology. Not that they knew they were teaching him.

He tapped the surface of Banner’s system.

The keyboard lit up in blue on the clear surface of the desk. The screen above it, also translucent like glass, came to life with a prompt for identity confirmation.
Loki carefully cast himself in the guise of the scientist. “Bruce Banner,” he said in Banner’s voice, and a blue beam swept over his illusory eyes in a retinal scan.

“Identity confirmed,” the automated voice said, and the screen faded to Banner’s workstation.

*Got you.*

Loki set to work, carefully following the steps he’d watched Banner take time after time to pull up the file on offrealm life, then Asgard, then his specific data. Thor’s was there as well, and Loki opened both files in different panes, side-by-side.

There was the analysis of his blood.

Loki grimaced. The results, though Banner had not as yet had time to examine them, given that the system only finished this morning, were quite clearly not those of Thor’s fraternal twin.

He narrowed his eyes. How to fake it?

An idea occurred to Loki, and he began to smile.

*Seidr* and Midgardian science were not so different. The former was a more advanced version of the latter, or a slightly different way of looking at the same thing. Loki had not quite determined how best to compare the two, though he thought “two sides of the same coin” fit nicely. He distantly thought that Darcy would be proud of his use of idiomatic expressions and called on his power.

Science and magic were not truly incompatible. *Seidr* was shaped by and responded to Loki’s will at its most basic, and his will was iron hard.

He slipped into the computer much easier than he’d expected.

Understanding on an intuitive, rather than conscious, level, what to do, Loki began changing the data. Slowly. One small piece at a time, until it aligned neatly with Thor’s and the network confirmed a fraternal match.

The door hissed open.

Loki reacted on instinct, vanishing himself from view.

Banner appeared in the gap.

He closed the windows. Wiped the recent file history.

Banner was halfway to the workstation. In five steps, he’d see the screen turned on.

Loki found the “log out” prompt, selected it, and promptly stepped to the side.

Banner paused and frowned at the workstation.

Loki held his breath and eased around the table, twisting the energy around him to muffle any noise he might make. Banner’s ears, even in his human shape, were stronger than the typical Midgardian’s, and Loki had no desire to meet the Hulk again. Once was enough.

He exhaled with relief when Banner at last returned to his station, seventeen minutes early, and the suspicion vanished in the face of simple mathematics.

Loki pressed his lips together, becoming increasingly irritated as the adrenaline of near-capture wore
off. Darcy was normally so relentlessly bossy about Banner, Foster, and Stark’s self-care that he’d fully expected her to keep them prisoner in the common area for the full allotted time. And if she did not, Clint frequently continued where she left off.

The lure of Loki’s blood test must have been too strong for Banner to resist.

Loki moved to the opposite end of the room. He could wait for Foster to get here, and slip out when the door opened for her, or teleport to his rooms. The problem was that teleportation might set off one of her various scanning devices; he didn’t want to risk any more seidr than he absolutely had to.

Waiting it was.

Loki settled on the edge of Foster’s desk, glancing idly over the papers she’d left out. Formulas scribbled on napkins sat beside binders full of data tables and letters on fancy cardstock. One was an award for something called the Nobel Prize in Physics, dated one year prior, for her work on Einstein-Rosen bridges and interstellar travel. Loki smirked. That research must have come from Thor’s disastrous first visit to this realm. His own memories of the incident were fragmented; he’d seen through the Destroyer’s face thanks to his seidr, and it processed things in terms of its target.

But he remembered seeing Foster and Darcy there in that town.

He’d been too caught up in his vengeance, in grief and fury and resentment, to pay much attention to Midgard. Also, admittedly, the town in question was not a particularly awe-inspiring representative of humans’ accomplishments. Nor had he really noticed Darcy, Foster, or Selvig, except as Thor’s stupidly brave human sidekicks. But he realized in hindsight that Jane had been the reason Thor overcame his childish arrogance and selfishness, and that Darcy was the reason for Jane’s success.

Darcy.

Loki frowned and forced himself to admit that he was growing rather… fond of the Midgardian woman.

And, if he was being honest, the rest of the Avengers were beginning to grow on him. Rogers’ quietly competent leadership, balanced by Stark’s biting genius and more flamboyant style; Barton’s humor and easy friendship; Bruce’s kind and compassionate nature; the drive and overwhelming curiosity in Jane Foster; Hill’s sharp and forthright skill; Natasha’s clever mind and terrifying history; even Barnes. And Darcy herself, playing a not insignificant role in keeping them all functioning. They really were fascinating.

The door hissed open again.

Loki slid down off the desk and made for the door.

Jane marched through, making a beeline for her station.

He stepped around her and barely ducked through the doors before they hissed shut.

Loki breathed a sigh of relief and started up for the common area.

He stepped out of the elevator and someone latched onto his arm.

Loki barely curbed his reflex, which was to shatter the offending hand, when he registered that it was Darcy. “Miss Lewis,” he greeted smoothly.

She squinted at him. “Where were you?”
“Why do you want to know?” he said with a cunning smile.

Darcy rolled her eyes and shoved him back into the elevator. He let her. “You’re an ass. Lobby, please, JARVIS.”

“Miss Lewis, is Mr. Stark aware you plan to take Loki out of Avengers Tower?” JARVIS asked.

Loki twisted around to stare at Darcy.

She ignored him. “Yeah, I asked this morning. It’s cool, J-man.”

“I would appreciate an explanation,” Loki said.

Darcy grinned at him as the elevator started to move. She was so small compared to him, and he could kill her in a second, and she knew what he’d done, but she didn’t look uneasy in the slightest at being trapped in a small space with him. It was a surprise, and a—gift?—he did not deserve. “You haven’t left the top floors in like four months. The balcony doesn’t count. I needed an afternoon off and I thought you might want to tag along.”

Loki examined her. “Is the press giving you trouble?”

“There’s a movement against the Avengers,” Darcy said with a sigh. “Spearheaded by Bruce’s old buddy Ross. Real charmer. They think we’re dangerous rogue agents, not to be trusted, blah blah blah, and Tony didn’t win any friends with that mess a few years back.”

“What mess?” Loki asked.

“US government tried to seize the Iron Man suit as a weapon,” Darcy said, waving a hand. “He mouthed off in the courtroom, got in a fight, SHIELD stuck their fingers in, the whole nine yards.” Loki raised an eyebrow. Even now, she sometimes spoke in phrases that were nearly incomprehensible to him. “Details don’t really matter. Long story short is we don’t exactly have a history of A-plus cooperation with the boys in blue. Apparently they thought Captain America would keep us in line, but after this week it’s obvious he’s off the rails too, and they don’t like it. Oh, hey, disguise yourself. Not Borden. Someone else. We’re almost to the lobby.”

Loki cast an illusion spell of a guise he’d worn before, a man of approximately his own height with sandy brown hair cropped short and light blue-gray eyes but otherwise a similar physique. It simply made things easier to keep his illusions close to his own size; he didn’t have to expend so much power. “Is my garb appropriate?”

Darcy eyed his clothes. Loki was wearing black Midgardian trousers and a simple dark gray shirt that buttoned down the front. “Yeah, you’re good. Pro tip: don’t do that glaring thing, it’ll scare people.”

The elevator began to slow.

“What ‘glaring thing’?” he asked.

“You like stare at people like a predator sometimes,” she said. Was that—a trace of a blush? “Try not to.”

Loki bit back a smile. “Copy that.”

“Hey, you’re learning Midgarian,” Darcy said drily.
She led the way out of the elevator. Loki followed. They were still several stories up in the Tower; it seemed prudent that the elevator leading straight to the Avengers’ sanctum was not in the public areas of the building. A few businesspeople in suits crossed the glass-and-chrome open space.

Darcy nodded at a few people sitting and talking around one of several clusters of sofas and potted plants. Two of the people nodded back and cast curious looks at Loki.

“Why are they staring at me?” he asked.

“Hm? Oh.” Darcy glanced back at her acquaintances as she started down a wide staircase, Loki one step behind. “You’re an unfamiliar face. And a hot one. And you’re with me.”

“Do you not normally have visitors?” Loki said, disregarding the fact that she considered him attractive. This wasn’t his true face, after all. He quickened his pace. For such a small person, she made it down the steps with surprising speed. “I would imagine there are a number of young men pursuing you.”

Darcy snorted. “Hardly. I dated around a lot in college, got kinda sick of it. And now that I’m working with the Avengers, people are either intimidated or they’re just into me for my status, which, no. Jane keeps trying to convince me to go on blind dates. The last one was a few months ago, and it was a disaster. Haven’t tried since.”

The stairs hit a landing, and they turned the corner. Loki took in the large atrium, filled with purposeful humans going about their business, glass-walled and well-designed. Avengers Tower really was a lovely building. “What about you?” Darcy asked. “Got a girlfriend or boyfriend back on Asgard? Wait, can people be gay there? Thor didn’t seem like the type to go along with that.” She waved her hands around in a way that was probably supposed to clarify her statement, but Loki didn’t get the meaning.

“‘Gay’ being same-sex romantic relations?” he clarified.

“Basically. Yeah.”

He shrugged. “Asgardians are… slow to change, either their opinions or their actions. Odin’s generation tends to simply turn a blind eye. Those Asgardians nearer my age, or Thor’s, do not care. I prefer women, but Thor’s friend Fandral–you may remember him–favors other men. And no, I have no girlfriend at present.”

“Huh,” Darcy said. “Wait. You’re using Allspeak, right? So I’m hearing ’girlfriend’ but I don’t think that’s a direct translation.”

Loki laughed. Her interest was endearing, and she asked sharp questions. They left the bottom of the staircase and began to cross the open lobby. People nodded to Darcy and got out of her way. “No. In Sirren, the language spoken on Asgard, the word is ‘ekenni’ for a female counterpart in a romantic, unmarried partnership.”

“Interesting.” Darcy paused by the side of the front doors. “Oh, by the way, Tony said I need to clarify this: you stay with me the whole time we’re out there. I know your house arrest is voluntary, but he doesn’t trust you not to cause problems and also I don’t wanna give Maria an excuse to put a bullet in your leg, because she’d enjoy that. Keep this… fake person disguise, stay near me, and no voodoo.”

“You have my word,” Loki said, amused.

“For what it’s worth,” she muttered, and headed for the doors.
Loki gently caught her arm and made her pause. “When I make an oath, I keep my word,” he said.

“Thor told us what you did, you know,” Darcy said, voice low but intense. “You convinced Laufey you’d help him kill Odin, broke your word, and killed Laufey instead, in a bid for the throne. You turned on your own brother. Oh yeah, and your nickname is the God of Lies and Deception. I’m sorry, but that’s not a fantastic track record, buddy.”

Loki felt the muscles in his jaw flex with anger. “On Asgard, an oath given is a vow not to be broken,” he said. “Even by me. Laufey was foolish enough not to ask me for one, and I never swore myself to Thor, thank the Norns. I may make oaths that are worded to give me the upper hand, or lead the recipient to make false assumptions, but when I give my word I keep it.”

Darcy wasn’t intimidated in the slightest. She just narrowed her eyes and examined him carefully for a few seconds.

“Cool,” she said abruptly, all trace of the canny politician vanishing behind her sunny demeanor. “Come on, then.”

When she pushed the door open, a wave of sound washed over Loki’s ears, the vehicle engines and shouts and strains of music and chattering voices that made up the rhythm of a city. He’d grown familiar with these sounds in the months he’d spent wandering Midgard on his own, and it was surprisingly pleasant to be in the city on street level again.

“Where are we going?” he asked, following her down the sidewalk.

Darcy grinned up at him. “Have you had sushi yet?”

“No,” he said. “I have heard of it.”

“It’s an Asian dish involving rice and raw fish and vegetables and it’s delicious,” she said with relish. “Oh my God what about ice cream?”

“I have had ice cream in the vanilla flavor,” Loki said.

“Boring. We’re stopping for ice cream after sushi. Falafel? Tell me you’ve tried falafel.”

Her enthusiasm was catching. He felt his lips begin to curve into a smile, genuine, for once, rather than sharp and cutting. “I have not.”

Darcy cocked her head. “I’ve like barely eaten today, I can have sushi and falafel, what the hell. Do you eat like Thor?”

“Are you referring to manners, or quantity?” Loki asked.

Her laugh rang above engines and the distant sound of a honking car alarm. He found himself disproportionately pleased. “Quantity,” she said, still grinning. “I’ve seen you eat a few times; your manners are way better.”

“I do not consume as much as Thor, but more than most Midgardians.”

“Perfect. Hey, why do you never eat with the rest of us?” she asked.

Loki thought of the nights when all the Avengers in the Tower piled into their common area and ate pizza, mass quantities of take-out, or some kind of home-cooked food. “I never thought I would be welcome.”
“You should join us next time.”

“I… will consider it,” Loki said.

Darcy glared.

He relented. “Yes, I will attend.”

“Awesome,” she said. “There’s the sushi place. Right up ahead.” Darcy stopped at the edge of the sidewalk. “Here’s my plan. We are going to spend a few hours stuffing ourselves with a bunch of food and I am going to pretend that my responsibilities don’t exist and you are going to play along. An afternoon of just fun. Capiche?”

“Ika darvel,” he said. “I understand.”

“Sushi time,” Darcy crowed, and led the way into the shop.

Chapter End Notes

I have to say, this chapter was some of the most fun I’ve had this entire 140-something-thousand-word roller coaster ride. I’m so glad I finally get to post it :D

EDIT: I wonder, did anyone notice who Loki’s pleasant-faced disguise kind of resembles? ;D
“New hobby?”

Clint looked up from the balcony and the pots that covered it in a carpet of colors. “Maria–Hey. Uh, no, not really, I’ve been doing this for years, just… it’s my thing.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised,” Maria said, coming farther into his living room. “Since you seem to be better at keeping secrets than I remember.”

He winced. _Should’ve seen this coming, idiot._ “I’m sorry for keeping it from you. I didn’t want to.”

“But you did.” Her voice, and face, were inscrutable. As usual.

Clint rubbed a hand over his mouth. “Yeah. I did.”

“Why?”

“Because… I had to.” He met her eyes so she’d know he was serious. “It sucked, but it was necessary, and I won’t lie to you: I don’t regret it. I didn’t want you to have to keep it from Fury, and I didn’t want you to have to choose… us or him.”

Maria looked almost hurt for a second. “You didn’t know I would choose you?”

“I– we –couldn’t be sure,” Clint said, wondering whether she meant singular or plural you.

“Well.” Maria looked down. “Now you know.”

“Are you… can you forgive me?” Clint said softly. He was taking a risk. He never got this vulnerable… with Maria. He’d always gotten the sense that she didn’t like it. And she was so walled off all the time that who knew if she’d even be willing to reciprocate? So Clint had kept his mouth shut for years out of respect for her closed-off-ness. But maybe he could take a step in that direction. If she shut him down, he’d back off.

Maria let out a long breath and sat on the couch. “It’s forgiven, Clint. I just… wanted to ask you why.”

He hesitated, then walked over and sat down next to her. “If he bothers you that much, we can–you can get a flat nearby.”

Maria snorted. “I’m not going to pass up free rent.”

“I’m serious,” he said.

She finally met his eyes. Paused. “I… no, it doesn’t bother me that much. It was just a shock. I can deal. I’m already getting used to it.” Maria hesitated, then added, “Have you been avoiding me for the past few weeks?”

“I didn’t think you’d want to talk to me,” Clint admitted.
“I always want to talk to you,” she said.

Clint’s heart was beating a little faster than normal.

“I’m asexual,” she blurted.

…

“Really?”

“I wouldn’t have said it otherwise,” she said, already retreating back into her walls.

“No, no, I don’t… I was just… surprised,” Clint said, stumbling over his words. “I don’t care. Maria. Don’t leave.”

Slowly, she sat back down.

“I wasn’t… I don’t think any less of you for it,” he said, trying to make her understand. “It makes sense, actually.”

“What, because I’m not feminine?” she said, an edge to her voice.

“What? No!” Clint hated this. He wasn’t good with words. Not the sincere kind. “Just that you’ve never seemed to date anyone, or if you did it seemed like… you always seemed frustrated that they were asking something of you that you didn’t want to give, so you ended it. I always thought they just couldn’t handle you not telling them about your job, but it makes sense that… that a partner wanting something else from you… I’m gonna shut up now.”

When he dared to look up, he saw that Maria, unbelievably, was smiling. “I can’t believe you noticed all that.”

His lips quirked into a half smile. “I was paying attention.”

“Any particular reason?” she asked.

“I… care about you,” he said.

Maria hesitated. “As friends.”

“Always that. And… maybe more.”

“Even…” She didn’t have to explain what she meant. He understood her. He always did.

Clint shrugged. “I’ve had sex with a fair number of people. It’s fun. But I don’t really need it or anything. It’s not a big deal to me either way.”

“You’re sure?” Maria said.

He grinned. “I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t mean it.”

She laughed. Touched his hand once, lightly.

Clint leaned back on the sofa, grinning like an idiot.

“Okay, now tell me more about your plant hobby,” Maria said, pointing at his window. “Why are there tiny trees?”

“Okay, now tell me more about your plant hobby,” Maria said, pointing at his window. “Why are there tiny trees?”
“They’re bonsai trees,” he said with mock offense, jumping up. “An ancient Japanese tradition. It’s relaxing.”

“Okay, Yoda,” she said, snickering. “And the flowers?”

“More immediate gratification,” he said with a grin, kneeling by the balcony. “Here’s some top-secret botany information: trees grow slower than flowers.”

“Gasp,” Maria said, voice dripping sarcasm. She joined him at the window and reached out to brush her fingers over one of the bonsai trees. “How do you keep them so small?”

Clint smiled.
Chapter 94

Avengers Tower

October 2011

“Barnes!”

He looked up from the coffee maker.

“Hey. How’s the arm doing?” Stark asked, pointing at Bucky’s metal arm.

He looked down at it. “Still functioning, but not like before.”

“Well, we’re about to move on Hydra and I wouldn’t feel right sending you in with a malfunctioning appendage—” Stark melodramatically placed a hand over his heart and the arc reactor in his chest—“so come on.”

Hope flared, painful and bright. “You have a replacement?”

“Oh yeah,” Stark said with a manic grin.

Bucky followed. His memories were coming back, slowly but surely, and he saw much of Howard in this man. Howard’s good qualities: curiosity, ingenuity, genius. And some of his flaws, too—pride, for one, and the arrogance. But so far Bucky thought he preferred Stark the younger.

They passed Darcy’s office. Bucky waved to her, and she grinned back, then went right back to arguing with whoever was on the other end of the phone. She’d been helping him adjust to the twenty-first century, along with Loki, and he thought he might have another friend than Natasha and Steve.

It was kind of terrifying.

He almost didn’t want to remember all the things he’d done for Hydra in his years as a brainwashed machine. Those memories weren’t coming back easily, and he half-hoped they wouldn’t. Bucky didn’t want anyone to find out. He wanted to leave it in the past, where it belonged, so he didn’t have to risk these people walking away from him again. Natasha never would. That, he could have faith in. But he was starting to want to keep these people around too.

“Welcome to the playground,” Stark said, throwing his arms wide as he stepped into his lab.

Bucky glanced at him. “I’ve been here before.”

“Pfft. Semantics.” Stark waved at Jane, who was bustling around her section of this floor like a whirlwind, and dragged Bucky over to the back corner. A table rested there, and on it was a long box.

Bucky realized he was compulsively rubbing his right fingers over the metal plates on his left hand and forced himself to stop.

“I tried to keep it as close to your description as possible,” Stark said.

Bucky nodded and reached out. When he laid his hand on the lid, the catches released with twin clicks, and he took a deep breath before lifting the top off the box.
The arm lay inside. Flesh-colored, limp, and eerily natural.

Stark pulled it out and held it up to Bucky’s body. “I had JARVIS scan you and fabricate this according to your measurements, so if it doesn’t fit I’m losing my edge. If the skin tone’s not quite right, it’ll automatically modulate over the course of the next few days to match your skin tone closer. The surgery will happen today, preferably; if your adjustment period goes well, you should be able to go along with the rest of us after Hydra.”

Bucky ran his fingers over the prosthesis. His real fingers. It felt like cool skin. Stark had even added fake hairs along its surface. The hand was wrinkled in the right places, with irregular fingernails that looked so real he almost thought Tony had grown them in a lab.

“Did you grow this in a lab?” he asked.

Tony grinned. Oh, yeah, that was Howard all right. He couldn’t resist talking about the things he’d done. Himself in general. “Nope. The exterior is synflesh, but a newer, tougher variety I created. With Bruce’s help, technically. It won’t tear easily; it’s tougher than normal skin and it can tolerate extremely high and low temperatures. Won’t grow; the nails and hair and wrinkles are there for aesthetic purposes. You should be able to blend in after this. Other than your face, that is. And it’ll be at least as strong as the one you have now, but significantly more sensitive and with better motor control and neural integration. Those Hydra scientists were good, but they weren’t me.”

“Thank God for that. I doubt the world could handle more than one Tony Stark,” Bruce commented drily. Bucky hadn’t even noticed him come over. He nodded to the doctor. He liked Bruce. His presence was calming, and he’d helped Bucky understand how his brain was working to recover his memories.

“We can go forward with the surgery whenever you’re ready,” Bruce said. “There’s no hurry, James. It doesn’t have to be-”

“Today,” Bucky interrupted. “Please.”

Bruce glanced at Stark. “Tony, I told you not to pressure him.”

“I didn’t!” Stark protested. “You’re the one who said we can do it whenever.”

Bruce sighed. “James, are you sure?”

Bucky looked down at his metal fingers. They flexed shut, then opened again, moving more slowly and stiffly than before. He was damaged goods. It was a miracle his arm had lasted through the fight on the helicarrier. Metal plates, the red star—all meant to mark him, inspire terror, let the world know who he belonged to.

He could inspire terror in his enemies without a metal arm. And he didn’t belong to anyone except himself now.

It was time for this arm to go.

“I’m sure,” he said.

Stark was already turning away. “I’ll go prep the surgery.”
Chapter 95

Hydra Facility [Classified Location]

October 2011

“ETA six minutes,” JARVIS said.

Sam settled his wingsuit more snugly on his shoulders. Tony had taken it for tune-ups after the fight against Hydra and given it back with a few upgrades. It was lighter than before, only by a few pounds but enough to notice, and even though Sam had been training he still noticed the difference.

So far, working with the Avengers had been pretty awesome.

He was still living in his flat down the street from the VA, and working there most days—not the most glamorous or high-paying job, but he liked it—but he spent a few days a week at the Tower. They’d been planning their assault on Hydra or flying out with Tony and a rotating cast of the others to work with his wings and some of their upgrades, courtesy of Tony, on a property outside the city owned by Stark Industries. And now here they were, seven people and an AI in a jet. Sam was enjoying being back in the fight.

And it helped that he genuinely liked most of them.

“How’s it feel?” Tony asked.

Sam turned around. Tony wasn’t yet in his Iron Man suit, but Sam knew it only took seconds to get the thing on. “Haven’t quite adjusted to the new weight,” he admitted.

“I could line it with lead or something.”

Sam grinned. “Nah, it’s cool. Just takes some getting used to, that’s all.”

“How’s it feel?” Tony asked.

Sam turned around. Tony wasn’t yet in his Iron Man suit, but Sam knew it only took seconds to get the thing on. “Haven’t quite adjusted to the new weight,” he admitted.

“I could line it with lead or something.”

Sam grinned. “Nah, it’s cool. Just takes some getting used to, that’s all.”

“ETA four minutes.”

Tony glanced up toward the cockpit, and Clint flying the plane, when JARVIS spoke. “Guess I better suit up.”

“You’ve got the easiest job of any of us,” Sam pointed out.

“That’s because I’m the smartest.” Tony headed toward the right front section of the jet, where his suit waited in its compartment.

Towards the tail, Steve and Barnes talked in low voices. Steve was ready, except for the helmet still sitting on the bench next to him, and Barnes was busy adjusting his tac vest. Tony had changed its design beyond the standard military make, and even without the metal arm, Barnes cut a terrifying figure. His mask rested on the bench next to Steve’s helmet.

Maria sat up front, next to Clint. Occasionally Sam had seen them talking quietly, but mostly they sat in silence, hands resting on top of each other in the space between their seats when Clint didn’t need both hands for flying.

Natasha, the last person on the jet, wasn’t talking to anyone. She was just sitting in the left side of the central space, where the fuselage began to taper into the left wing, twirling her fangs around her fingers. They were black weapons about a foot long and an inch in diameter, and each one delivered
brutal shocks from either end. Controls in the middle let Natasha change the setting from what she called “mild sting” to “barbeque”. Sam had taken a hit from the “mild sting” setting and it wasn’t mild. At all.

“ETA two minutes.”

“Everyone get in position,” Steve called.

Sam rolled his shoulders again, tugged on the cuffs of his thermal suit, and joined Steve and Barnes at the back of the craft. Barnes was checking his guns, and Steve deftly slid one into the holster on his left thigh. His shield was already settled over his back.

“Ready?” Steve asked.

Sam grinned. “I was born ready.”

“Must’ve been a difficult delivery,” Natasha said with a grin, joining them. Her hair was hidden beneath a black hat, and her thermal suit–another one of Tony’s inventions, barely thicker than denim but impossibly warm–hugged her body, layered with pockets and weapons.

“You’ve no idea,” Sam said. “I was a super ugly baby. Mom said she thought the hospital did a switch.”

“So did mine,” Steve said, also smiling.

Barnes shook his head. “Have you seen pictures of him as a kid?” he asked Sam and Natasha, and Tony, who had walked over with his suit on and faceplate up. “Skin and bones. Always covered in bruises.”

Natasha poked Steve in the stomach. “Howard Stark definitely did you a favor.”

Steve postured, hands on his hips and chest thrust out. “I am Captain America,” he boomed. “Scourge of Hitler and Hope of the Free World–”

“Did they actually call you that?” Sam interrupted, laughing.

Tony rolled his eyes. “You have no idea. It was ridiculous. And of course I heard all the damn nicknames growing up, dear old Dad never shut up about Mr. Glorious here–”

“Better than you, who never shuts up about himself,” Natasha interjected. Tony looked fake wounded while the others laughed.

“Drop in sixty seconds,” Clint called from the front.

Steve got serious. “Comms check.”

Everyone reached up and fired up their earpieces. Levity vanished and they lined up along the back edge of the jet. Sam and Tony stood in front, as the two who could fly; Maria, Steve, Barnes, and Natasha lined up behind them with parachutes on their backs. To stay out of sight, they were dropping from way higher than even an enhanced human could survive without a chute.

“Check.”

“Widow’s good.”

“Falcon’s good.” Sam flipped his goggles down and the overlay lit up with red lines and words
across the screen.

“I’m good.”

Steve sighed. “Tony—”

“My code name sucks,” Tony argued.

“Okay, his comm works. Winter’s good,” Barnes interrupted.

“Shadow’s good.” Maria shifted her feet.

“Hawkeye’s good,” Clint said from the cockpit. The jet decelerated to a hover. “Drop in five. Four. Three. Two. One.”

The rear bay door began to open.

Cold wind blew in around the edges, not as strong as if they’d been moving but still significant. The thermal suit protected Sam from the worst of it. Predawn sky gleamed between the patchy clouds that surrounded their jet, the nearest of which were churned like cotton candy from the engines. Sam had a second to take in the surreal view before he was leaping forward, in sync with Tony, and launching into a dive.

Wind howled in his ears. He blasted through one cloud after another, the portable short-range radar unit built into his suit sending out pings. It’d light up his overlay if he was about to hit something. To the left, the glow of Tony’s thrusters pulled ahead, faintly visible through the fog.

Sam was falling in a face-first pencil dive. He lifted his arms and the wind caught them, pulling him into a belly-down skydiver’s drop just as he burst out of the lowest cloud layer.

The light was weird down here, early morning rays filtered and diluted by the clouds. It was mostly dark, but he could make out the buildings down below, light gleaming in a few windows.

He brought his arms into his chest and snapped them out to the sides.

His wings followed. Sam’s cheeks rippled with G-forces as he decelerated abruptly, seventy feet above the ground.

Tony’d circled around to the south. “Ready, Falcon?”

“I’m go,” Sam said.

Steve’s voice filtered over the comms. “Chutes deployed. Touchdown in thirty to sixty seconds.”

“Roger that,” Tony said.

Sam heard the gunfire start.

He tipped into a dive, wings out, aiming for the north side and the guards there, highlighted in red silhouettes on his overlay. His job, and Tony’s, was to take out the guns on the roof so they wouldn’t turn the others’ chutes into Swiss cheese. Then the rest of the team would land, and they’d go in on foot while Sam and Tony distracted the guards.

Sam flexed his wrist in a practiced gesture. The highly modified gun on his right gauntlet expanded and clacked into place. Targeting vectors popped up on his overlay. This was new. This was a Stark toy, quiet and efficient. Sam liked it. He picked a target. Fired. Missed. Shit. Still not used to this.
Aimed, fired again. This time the guard went down with two bullets in his chest.

It was a complicated thing, flying and aiming and shooting, and Sam quickly fell into the instinctive soldier mind. Things got easier when he wasn’t overthinking how to match his aim to the target vectors on his overlay. Just aim, see the green, pull the trigger, watch them fall.

Thirty seconds and the north side was clear.

Sam swung east, picked off the foot soldiers there. Against the still-dark sky, he was invisible, and they were oblivious to his presence. Even Tony was managing to keep things quiet. Shockingly. No one had raised the alarm yet.

When the roof and outdoor walkways were clear, he took off in a wide, swooping arc, scanning the rest of the complex for anyone outside. Six buildings, five of them auxiliary positioned around the main one. The glow of Tony’s laser cutter erupted below. He’d be carving the roof-mounted guns into scrap metal.

“Coming in for landing,” Natasha said over comms.

“Roof clear.” Tony’s thrusters lit up as he lifted up into the sky.

“So’s the rest of the complex.” Sam curved lower, readying a few grenades. His radar picked out the parachutes in the sky; he looked up and barely made out the dark gray fabric and his team’s small silhouettes against the sky. “You’re good to land.”
Steve’s boots hit the roof.

He ran a few steps, slowing down, until his chute collapsed with a soft *whump* behind him. He unbuckled the strap across his chest that held the whole harness together and ducked out of the rig in a single movement, leaving it behind him. They were unmarked, not that it mattered. Theirs was not an inconspicuous team.

Natasha, Bucky, and Maria fanned out, covering the corners of the roof, but Sam and Tony had done their work well. The compound was clear and quiet, occupied only by Avengers and corpses.

Bucky found the roof door. They hadn’t been able to tell, on the satellite imagery, if there even was one; they’d come prepared to blast their way in if they had to. But judging by the debris on the ground, Hydra guys liked to come up here for a smoke. Steve curled his lip at the evidence of their nasty habit and dragged the door open.

The stairwell lit up as soon as Natasha put a foot on the step.

She glanced back, shrugged, and kept walking.

“Motion sensor?” Maria asked.

“Must be.” Steve followed Natasha, and the rest of his team filed in behind him.

“Stark, Falcon, status?” Bucky asked the comms.

There was a crackle, and then, Tony said, “Ready when you are.”

“Same here,” Sam added.

Steve looked down the stairwell. There was a landing and a switchback every ten steps, so it was hard to tell how far down they’d have to go. “Stand by.”

Natasha rounded the next landing and stopped.

“What is it?” Steve hissed.

“Door.” She slowly unholstered a gun, held it in a right-handed ready grip aimed at the ceiling, and eased down the last few steps. Steve raised his shield and Bucky leveled an automatic rifle over its top edge as Natasha reached the door and rested a hand on the handle.

She glanced back at them and mouthed, *Three, two, one, go!*

She turned the knob, shoved the door open, and pressed herself flat against the wall.

No one was on the other side.
Steve waited a count of thirty before he stood and crept down the stairs, Bucky and Maria on his heels.

Maria raised a hand, pulled something long and rectangular off her belt, bent down, and slid it soundlessly into the hall. In her other hand was a palm-sized tablet. Steve saw infrared images drawn on it in blue and green.

*Nothing*, Maria said in Army hand-signs.

Steve hefted his shield and led the way into the hall while Maria tucked her miniature periscope away.

Bucky and Natasha fanned out around him.

They seemed to have found an administrative area. Offices. They paused long enough for Maria to slip into one of them and stick a flash drive into the computer there. The network here was totally isolated, but Tony had said that once they got a virus he’d written into the system, it would be “JARVIS’ playground.”

“Got the link,” Tony said. “JARVIS?”

“I have begun the data transfer,” JARVIS said. “Storage drives on the Quinjet should be adequate for…”

Steve tuned them out. Focused on the assault.

At the end of the administrative hall, they found an elevator.

Bucky inserted the fingers of his new prosthetic arm into the gap between the doors. Natasha raised an eyebrow when he easily dented the metal in the shape of fingers when he dragged them aside. “Points to Tony for that bit of engineering,” she said softly.

Bucky’s eyes were all Steve could see of his face, but something about them suggested his old friend was smiling. “It’s working well.”

“Yes, we all know I’m a genius,” Tony said, because of course he could hear them all on the comms. “Can we get this circus into the main ring already?”

“Circus metaphors?” Steve said, clambering into the shaft and locking a tension clamp onto the cables. “Really?”

“Part of my charm.”

Steve shook his head and opened the clamp, dropping himself into the darkness.

The cable vibrated as he fell with the weight of himself and Bucky, Maria, and Natasha behind him. Steve angled his shield to deflect any projectiles from below.

A flashlight beam lanced down from above him.

For a second, then two, it showed nothing.

The top of the elevator came into view.

Steve instantly tightened his grip on the clamp. His descent slowed quickly; his arm muscles burned with the strain of holding his entire body’s weight as he slowed. By the time his boots touched the
ground, he was almost stopped. Steve disengaged the clamp with one hand and rolled aside a heartbeat before Bucky landed next to him.

In the span of five seconds, all four of them were positioned in the corners of the shaft.

Bucky reached down and broke the lock off the ceiling hatch, then pulled it open. The car below was dark and empty. They dropped through one at a time and hauled the doors open.

Steve flipped the HUD inside his helmet down and blinked while the night vision kicked in. Bucky, Maria, and Natasha all pulled night vision goggles on.

“We’re on the lab level,” Steve said softly.

“Power’s going out in ten seconds,” Sam said.

Steve raised his shield and cocked a gun in his right hand.

“Seven. Six.”

Bucky got a grip on the elevator doors and stood to the side, ready to rip them open.

“Four.”

Maria and Natasha were ready on Steve’s flanks, goggles on and guns out.

“Two. One.”

A distant explosion rocked the elevator. Silence descended on the compound as the background hum of servers, climate control units, and pipes all fell silent.

“Go,” Steve said.

Bucky tore the doors open.

Steve dove through.

Fire hit his shield almost instantly. These Hydra guards were well-trained; they’d scrambled on the elevator the second the lights went out. But they didn’t have goggles.

Steve took down four of them with his pistol before he closed the distance.

Sounds from behind: his team, engaging.

On the surface, Sam and Tony would be running containment. No one would get off this property aboveground.

He tore his way through the last of the guards, ignored two bleary-eyed and terrified scientists, and closed on the back of the room.

An explosion from his left sent Steve flying. He tried to twist, to land on his feet or at least not his head, but searing pain exploded in his side and then his head hit something and the world went dark.

Chapter End Notes
I'm not sorry :(
“How’s Steve?” Natasha asked.

Barnes looked down. “Awake.”

“And pissed that they’re keeping him in the hospital,” Sam added, stepping out of the elevator behind Barnes. They’d made it to the hospital to visit Steve, stayed there for an hour, and come back, all without more than mild bickering. A miracle. “But Tony said he’d let Loki loose on pranks if Steve sneaked out before the doctors said let him go. So he’s staying.”

Natasha grinned. “Clever.”

“My idea,” Darcy said, sauntering into the room.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Of course it was.”

He wasn’t sure about Darcy. She seemed to do a lot for the Avengers—handling the press, running Tony’s PR department, managing Loki, negotiating things with the State Department, even—and she definitely had a leadership role on par with Steve’s or Tony’s. Yet Darcy had no title, no nickname, and no popular following like those gathering behind the other Avengers. She was their television face, but almost everyone got so busy trying to look behind the curtain that they completely ignored the woman holding it up. It was slightly unsettling. Sam didn’t know what to make of her. She was irreverent, silly, flippant: always on her phone or making a joke. Not that that was bad. It just didn’t seem to jive with the power and influence she was slowly gathering.

Not to mention the fact that she could probably have him out on his ear if she took a dislike to him, and Sam had decided that he definitely wanted to stay.

Barnes settled slowly into a chair beside Natasha. The man never relaxed, not really. He was aware of every movement. Sam made a face at Barnes behind his back—Darcy smirked—and headed for the fridge. He was starving.

“Has Tony made any progress?” Natasha asked.

“Yeah, actually,” Darcy said, and tossed Barnes a tablet. “Here you go.”

Barnes studied the thing for a few minutes.

Sam slid a box of cold (delicious) pizza onto the table. “Give me that,” he grumbled, “you’re taking forever.”

Maybe if you’d give me a chance to think it through,” Barnes retorted.

“Yeah, well, that might take even longer—”

“You wouldn’t be doing half so well if you got thrown a century forward in time—”
“Woo, look at you, the big bad supersoldier, I’m shaking in my boots—”

“Boys, please,” Natasha said. “You’re both pretty.”

Sam grimaced and flicked through the tablet’s apps. Somehow Barnes ended up in Evernote. Like Tony Stark used that shitty software. Sam got to the StarkPads’ internal synchronized file-sharing system and got the document that Tony’d dumped in there only a half hour before.

“Holy shit,” he said.

“Pretty much,” Darcy agreed.

Sam wordlessly passed the tablet to Natasha. She angled the screen and leaned into Barnes, who tipped his head to read over her shoulder. If Barnes was constantly aware of his own body, he was even more conscious of Natasha, Sam thought distantly. And Natasha was always aware of him, though she hid it better.

Their eyes widened slowly as they read.

“Drugs?” Barnes asked. “What use are…”

He trailed off when the door to their rooms on the next floor up opened and Loki walked in.

“Don’t mind me,” the Asgardian said with a wave of his hand. “Just searching for… ah.” He spotted the pizza on the table and sank gracefully into a seat across from Sam, appearing totally focused on his food and not at all on them. A lie. Definitely a lie. Sam didn’t trust this guy an inch.

Barnes cleared his throat. “What use are drugs?”

“Oh, loads,” Darcy said, her face sharpening into something cruel. “It’s like this: immediate debilitating addiction. It also has the charming side effect of cellular corrosion and erases behavioral inhibitions when you’re high. When you’re not, you’re moody, you’re grouchy, you have no appetite, and can’t focus. If you quit using, your nervous system eventually shuts down. If you don’t quit, you die. Tony estimates two to six years of use before your body basically falls apart because cells are dying faster than they’re reproducing and apparently your organs don’t like that very much.”

“That was all in the report,” Barnes said.

Darcy grinned. “I know that was in the report; I’m recapping because Tony gets all verbose and shit. I made Bruce explain this to me. He doesn’t get pumped up on his ego when people don’t understand his words. Anyway. Kiddie version aside, do you wanna know the worst part?”

“That’s not the worst part?” Sam said incredulously. His brain was spinning. Alien invasions, secret Hydra cancers, and now space drugs?

“Not even close. Our resident extraterrestrial expert—that’s He of the Cow-horned Helmet over there stuffing his face with pizza—” Loki looked offended—“recognized one of the compounds. It comes from offworld. This was definitely part of Hydra’s plan.”

Sam grimaced. “Okay, but like—how does that help them? Money?”

“Hydra’s not short on moolah,” Darcy said. “At least, they weren’t. I’m like eighty percent sure they were selling that drug somewhere, probably a cartel, and hoping to start selling it on the market. Easy way to weaken our population and culture before they invade.” She cut her eyes sideways at Loki. “Seems like they learned from their last attempt.”
“Don’t use unwilling puppet generals,” Loki said, finishing his last piece of pizza. “Yes, that would be an excellent piece of advice for any leader.”

Darcy swatted him. “Dude. Seriously. Leaving no food for the lady?”

Sam realized the pizza box was empty. “Hey,” he said. “I wanted some of that.”

Loki glanced at Barnes, who—shockingly—grinned back.

“Oh, I see how it is,” Sam said, unable to completely hide his amusement. “All you people with bottomless stomachs trying to starve me out. You know what, I’m just ordering another pizza and you’re not getting any of it.”

“Bet?” Barnes asked, leaning forward.

Sam pointed at him. Time to play his ace. “Hell yes. I’m getting pineapple on this bitch.”

Barnes looked scandalized, as he had last week when Darcy showed him Hawaiian pizza. “Pineapple does not go on pizza,” he insisted.

“Not on your pizza,” Sam said agreeably, half laughing, as he dialed Domino’s. They all liked Domino’s best. The one closest to the Tower had been doing a booming business the last few months, Sam suspected.

Barnes scowled, but Sam could see the corners of his mouth tugging upward.

“Glad to see they’re finally getting along,” Darcy stage whispered to Natasha, who smiled.

“Hey, Sam, can I get some of that Hawaiian?” Darcy called over.

Sam put a hand over his phone. “Absolutely. Since you asked so nicely.”

“I hate you,” Barnes moaned, and flopped backwards in his seat.

With the pizza on his way, Sam returned to serious topics. “About the mystery space drug,” he began.

“Space drug?” Barnes interjected.

“Really?” Sam said, turning to look at the other man. “Do you really have to pick a fight with everything that comes out of my mouth?”

“Well most of what comes out of your mouth is stupid, so yeah,” Barnes shot back.

“Oh, look who’s talking, Mr. Broody Angsty Face, half of what you say is basically ‘boo hoo muh memories’—”

Darcy whistled. “Hey! Hello! Not that this isn’t entertaining but we’ve already seen this show today. Serious topic of conversation? Remember that?”

Amazingly, Natasha, the Black Widow, one of the deadliest people on the planet, was laughing. Barnes shot her a betrayed look, which only made her laugh harder.

Loki raised his eyebrows. “I am continually amazed that this is how Midgard’s best soldiers and
defenders behave in their leisure time."

“Oh, shut up, I’ve heard Thor’s stories,” Darcy said. “He and his buddies get up to way weirder shit than this, and I know you were involved in at least half of it. Sam, you were saying?”

Sam paused. “What was I… oh. Right. I have some contacts in the Army and State Department still, I can talk to them and see if they’ve seen anything overseas. Picked up on any rumors. No one in the CDC, though.”

“I believe Banner has worked with the CDC on a number of occasions,” Loki said. “Perhaps he could speak with his colleagues?”

“Good plan.” Darcy typed something into her tablet, probably a note or a message. “And Tony said he’d work the actual black market for illegal drugs.”

“Of course he knows people in the drug market,” Natasha said rolling her eyes.

Darcy shook her head. “You knew him back in Malibu, you’d know better than any of us.”

Natasha grimaced. “Fair point. That was a wild year.”

“Bet you never thought you’d look back on giant flying robots fighting and Tony Stark turning into a hero as the ‘normal’ days,” Sam said.

She snickered. “If someone had said that to me back then, I would’ve laughed. That was before an alien horde came through a hole in the sky and then, three months later, I made an alliance with the man who led them.”

“Or that you’d have him back,” Darcy said, pointing at Bucky.

Natasha smiled, shook her head. “That was a given. I was always going to get him back. It was just a question of when.”

“So romantic,” Sam said. “So like, on Valentine’s Day, do you give each other roses dyed red with the blood of your enemies, or is it just like chocolate and wine?”

Barnes cocked his head. “That’s actually an interesting idea–”

Sam threw his hands up. “Why did I even say anything?”

“No ,” Darcy said, laughing. “No bloody roses in this tower. Way too creepy. We’ve got enough disturbing crap happening without… bloody roses. ”

“You are no fun,” Barnes accused her.

“I am the most fun,” Darcy corrected. “You should see me at parties. I’m the bomb . You can entertain yourself in better ways than blood roses.” She wagged her eyebrows in a ridiculous, suggestive manner, and even Barnes started laughing at that one. Even Loki.

Sam’s phone dinged. “Pizza’s here,” he announced gleefully, heading for the box they used to bring food deliveries up from the ground floor.

“No no no do not bring that abomination over here–ugh,” Barnes said, eyeing the box with disgust as Sam plunked it on the table and flipped it open. Gooey, delicious Hawaiian pizza, the perfect mix of sweet pineapple and savory Canadian bacon and cheese and crust and sauce. Sam grabbed a piece and made a show of enjoying the hell out of it. Darcy sounded like she was laughing around a full
mouth, and even Natasha had a piece.

“You have betrayed me,” Barnes told her solemnly. “You’re all terrible people.”

“Haff'en' caugh' on yet?” Darcy said, and swallowed mightily. “We’re all terrible people. That’s why we get along so well.”

“She’s not wrong,” Natasha said, smiling, and reached for another piece.

Sam eyed Darcy, laughing and relaxed with pizza sauce on her fingers. Just a kid, really. Technically not much younger than him, but war ages you. She was just a kid who was doing an incredible job holding up her end, doing a job none of the rest of them would even want, dealing with immense stress, and she could still laugh and joke and stuff her face with pizza.

He decided maybe she wasn’t so bad.

Then he looked at the rest of them. Loki, a cast-aside prince from outer space; Barnes, the Winter Soldier, and the Black Widow, the deadliest assassins the world had ever known; even Sam had a not-insignificant number of lives on his hands. All of them sitting around a table. Getting along. Managing their separate demons, remembering how to laugh. Even though some of them had darkness in their depths that made him wary sometimes, Sam felt more at home with the Avengers than with anyone else he’d ever known.

He grinned and sat back in his seat, mouth full of pizza. This was a good life.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry updates have been kind of irregular; I’m in the middle of a huge series of tests and my schedule has just gone to hell in handbasket in the last few days. Here is the resolution to yesterday’s cliffhanger. (I didn’t write the whole action scene because this fic is already really long and I didn’t see a point; there’ll be plenty more fights that are more relevant to the plot!)
Chapter 98

Avengers Tower

November 2011

Darcy cruised into the lab, scanning for her best friend.

Instead, her eyes fell first on Loki. Shirtless.

He was facing away from her, electrodes taped to his arms and chest and back. Jane bustled around him, predictably not acknowledging Darcy’s presence, adjusting the connections. Loki started to turn but Jane prodded him. “Sit still,” she ordered, reaching for a bundle of cords. “The connection is extremely delicate.”

Darcy meandered closer, taking the time to appreciate the view. She had to admit Loki was one of the most attractive people she’d ever met. Asgardian genes were awesome. He was muscular and perfectly built to her taste, with strong shoulders tapering to narrow hips. There were a few freckles and spots on his back. It was oddly comforting to realize even Asgardians had flaws.

Darcy shook her head. She needed to get out more. It’d been awhile since she was with anyone; Hannah had trust issues and after her, John got ridiculously clingy. And, of course, Marya. Two bad breakups and then the grief of losing Marya had scared her off of dating seriously for a bit, and it hadn’t helped that everyone she met was either vapid or completely devoid of ambition. You’d think admiring the view on both sides of the fence would make it easier to find someone, but apparently not.

It was probably time to start dating if she was looking at Loki.

Darcy couldn’t lie to herself; it wasn’t like she’d never wondered what sleeping with him would be like. Probably fantastic. But it was a bad idea. A catastrophically bad idea. Don’t mix work and pleasure, that was her motto. Don’t sleep with the boss, don’t sleep with the girl who works for you, and definitely don’t sleep with deposed immortal space princes. She’d made the first two mistakes and had no intention of making the third.

Although it couldn’t hurt to look. And she was glad he’d been spending slightly more time with the rest of the team.

“Darcy,” Jane said with a quick smile.

“That’s new, you noticed me while Sciencing,” Darcy said with a grin. She didn’t try to hug Jane. Neither of them was a hugger. “Quelle surprise.”

“Your French is terrible,” Jane said.

“My French is fabulous, thanks very much,” Darcy said. “I was being funny.”

“Oh yeah, your language thing,” Jane said absently.

Darcy rolled her eyes and walked around Loki, standing to the side of the table Jane had him sitting on. She watched Jane working, distractedly noting the formulas and notes Jane scribbled on scraps of paper in between flurried bouts of typing or fiddling with the guts of the various scanners she had hooked up to Loki. It was a habit. Darcy used to follow behind Jane and collect those scraps so they
didn’t get lost. She’d probably do a little bit of that today.

“What language thing?” Loki asked.

Darcy switched her attention to him. “I like languages. Took a lot of intensives in college, taught myself a couple with free online stuff in high school.”

“In how many tongues are you fluent?” Loki said.

“Uh.” Darcy counted. “Five. French, Spanish, Russian, obviously English, and German. I can get by with Mandarin in a conversation but I’m shit at reading and writing the characters. And my Arabic is passable. Still working on that one.”

Loki blinked. He almost looked… impressed.

Then the expression was gone. Darcy knew she hadn’t imagined it. She kept the warm glow of pride she felt from showing on her face.

“Why do you concern yourself with learning these languages?” he asked.

Darcy shrugged. “I’ve always wanted to travel. It’s no fun to go to China or Tai Pei or Moscow or Paris if you don’t speak at least one language you’re likely to find there. And no one expects little old me to understand Mandarin. You wouldn’t believe the things people say in their native language when they don’t think anyone else can understand them. It’s hilarious.”

Loki smiled. “You are quite interesting, Miss Lewis.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” she said drily.

He lowered his voice. “It was intended as one.”

Darcy couldn’t think of a retort, so she raised a cool eyebrow in his direction and switched her focus back to Jane. “Yo, how much longer are you gonna be? Tony and Stevie are convening the war council. They want all hands on deck.”

“Two different metaphors in three sentences,” Jane said absently. “Nice. Um. I’m almost done, actually. Just need…” She spent thirty more seconds twiddling wires. “Okay. Loki, go.”

Loki tilted his head. A look of concentration came over his face.

He teleported three feet away.

Darcy jumped. “What the fu–”

“Brilliant!” Jane actually clapped her hands. Darcy glanced over, settling her heart rate, and watched numbers accumulate on Jane’s main screen from her various sensors and scanners and things with long acronymic names Darcy could never remember. “You are using quantum tunneling, but it’s a controlled effect-”

“I’m guessing you’d rather stay down here than join the war council,” Darcy said drily.

Jane looked at her guiltily. “Yes.”

Darcy laughed. “I figured as much, it’s cool. Loki, you wanna sit it on it?”

“I would prefer to,” he said, carefully peeling an electrode away from his forehead. “How
“I’d head up there,” Darcy said. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Loki raised an eyebrow at her. “Mmm.” He tugged a cotton T-shirt on and then a button-down over the top of it. He’d adopted a business semiformal style of Earth clothes. Darcy was trying to get him to wear jeans but he flat-out refused, sticking to khakis and slacks. “I shall see you up there, in that case.”

“Yup.” Darcy watched him walk away, eyes narrowed for a hint of the green light that came with his illusions. None came, and when the door shut behind him, she let out a breath and turned back to Jane.

“How’s the science?” she asked. It was how she always checked up on Jane’s progress in the lab. Their little greeting.

“Good.” Jane tore her eyes away from the data still being processed and added to the display. “I mean… interesting. Loki’s interesting. And interested. In you.”

“Huh?” Darcy’s train of thought crashed and burned. Spectacularly.

Jane grinned. “He thought I wouldn’t notice. I mean, technically it did take me a week or two to catch on, but he keeps asking questions about you, mostly how we met and what your life was like before the Avengers.”

Darcy stiffened.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t tell him,” Jane said hurriedly. “That’s what tipped me off, actually. He started asking casually about your family. Where you grew up. Things I knew you wouldn’t want me to pass on.”

Darcy blew out a breath. “Thank you.”

Jane touched her shoulder lightly. Darcy let herself relax a little more. A lot of people, when they learned Darcy was bi, would get awkward about touching her. Like it would rub off on them or they were afraid it would be unintentionally flirtatious. Which, like, she kind of got not wanting to accidentally flirt, that could get awkward with anyone regardless of who they liked, but at the same time it was ridiculous and annoying as fuck. Jane had never been like that. She didn’t care. She liked guys. Darcy would respect that and not hit on her. They were best friends and Jane was cool with casual physical contact. The end.

Sometimes Darcy found herself hating all the people who wouldn’t have been able to handle this situation. Who hadn’t, in reality, and who’d drifted away. It’s not like Darcy kept it a secret that she was bi.

After a moment, Jane withdrew her hand. “Have you heard from him?”

She didn’t mean Loki. Darcy shook her head. “Don’t even know where he is.”

“Probably better that way,” Jane said.

“Yeah.” Darcy’s hands inadvertently made fists. Definitely better that way. Otherwise the likelihood of her getting brought up on assault charges went through the fucking roof.

She took a deep breath and redirected the conversation. Some things should stay in the past. “How
are you? Beyond the science. Like.” She paused. “Got a guy?”

Jane snorted. “As if. I never leave the lab, and Tony’s kind of a one-woman kind of guy.”

“Bruce though,” Darcy said.

“We’re just friends.”

“Okay, okay, if you’re sure.” Darcy wondered if maybe Jane still wasn’t able to move beyond Thor. “We haven’t been able to talk for a while; you’re always down here and I’m always busy with psychotic reporters and our buddy Ross. Are you going to slap Thor again when he comes back? Because if so, let me know so I can be there with a video camera. I need to record that moment for posterity. And Loki.”

“Ha,” Jane said. “No. I am taking the high road. I’m also working with Tony to design a suit that renders you immune to his lightning. Completely sealed and nonconductive. Tony’s designing thermosuits already; Sam and Natasha were wearing them in the Hydra assault last month, and we’re building the anti-lightning bit into it.”

Okay, so she didn’t want to talk about it. Message received. Jane didn’t necessarily dislike emotions, she just forgot they existed and would prefer to ignore that she had them. Darcy let her off the hook.

“What about… the other thing we discussed?”

Jane ran a hand over her hair. “Done. Tony knows it better than I do, really, I’m not a very good engineer. I taught him what it had to do on a quantum level and he designed the actual thing.”

“Good.” Darcy sighed. “Steve still doesn’t know.”

“He wouldn’t agree?”

Darcy snorted. “You can’t see why?”

“I’m not good with people,” Jane said. “You know that.”

“He’d say it’s below the belt or something. He’ll get over it.”

Jane was typing, but she paused. “What about Loki?”

“I’m not actually worried about him,” Darcy said. “He’ll understand why we did it.”

Jane shrugged. “Okay. You should probably get up there, they’ll want you in on this.”

“I’m not the military strategist,” Darcy said. “But okay, I see how it is.”

“No, not like—I like having you here,” Jane said, jerking up. “I just meant—”

Darcy started laughing. “It’s cool, I was just teasing. I’ll be back later, ‘kay?”

“Definitely.” Jane’s face lit up. “Tony found a new element, and I tried beaming light through it in a computer simulation, and it could lead to some fascinating new discoveries about the nature of photons.”

“I’d love to hear more about the lightbender element later,” Darcy said solemnly, a smile tugging on her lips. “Have fun crunching numbers.”

“Always,” Jane said.
Darcy paused and watched her friend instantly immerse herself into the world of formulas and physics, unbearable fondness washing over her. Sometimes she wished she could be like Jane, and love the clear-cut world of science, dodge all the mess and stress of people. But she just wasn’t made that way.

Darcy idly thought about the possibility of taking a trip down to D.C. tomorrow. The DNI’s people had been bugging her for a few weeks and she should probably clear some things up in person. It’d be a nice gesture of respect to go herself; maybe she could convince Steve to come with her. Not Tony; he sucked ass at playing nice to people in power. And then there was the search the CIA and NSA and FBI were running for Fury; they’d set up a joint task force and apparently there was some friction between the task force and Stark’s people, some of whom were ex-SHIELD. Tony wouldn’t be any help smoothing that over, though maybe if she could get him to make some talk about how he really appreciated all their help and wanted to do everything in his power to cooperate and find Fury, et cetera, et cetera…

She was so lost in thought that she didn’t notice she wasn’t alone in the hall until Loki stepped right in her path.

Darcy snapped harshly back into reality. Her heart sped up.

“Didn’t realize this hallway was more interesting than Tony’s new intel,” she said slowly.

Loki angled his head. He wasn’t in her space, but challenge was written in every line of his body. “The hallway isn’t, no.”

When he said nothing more, she prodded, “Okay, so you’re still here… why exactly?”

“I’d like to ask you a question, Miss Lewis.”

“And I’d like Ross to suddenly think we’re the best thing since sliced bread.”

Loki raised an eyebrow.

“I thought we were both listing things that aren’t going to happen right now,” Darcy said, an edge to her voice. “But… why exactly?”

“Let’s join the war council, Miss Lewis?”

Darcy snapped harshly back into reality. Her heart sped up.

“Really?” He stepped closer. Still not really in her space, but starting to push the bubble. “Because you seem rather… nervous.”

“You’re physically intimidating,” Darcy retorted. “It’s subconscious. You think I’d spend so much time alone with you if I thought you would hurt me? The Avengers would rain holy hell on you.”

“Is that the only thing you believe is holding me back?” he asked. Darcy looked closer. The hallway was not well lit, but she almost thought he looked hurt.

Did she really think that?

He took her hesitation as an answer and stepped back. “Shall we join the war council, Miss Lewis?”

Loki’s tone had taken on a faintly mocking edge, and the curl to his lips was cruel.

She recognized a defense mechanism when she saw one.
“No,” Darcy said quietly.

He blinked. “Now you do not wish to join them?”

“Ass,” she snapped. “No. I don’t think you’d just randomly snap my neck or something if you were freed from your bargain.”

“You hesitated,” he said, but at least the cruelty was gone from his face.

She threw her hands up. “You threw a loaded question at me with no warning, what did you think I was gonna do, just spit out an answer without thinking about it? I’ve known enough abusive dickweeds to say you’re not one.”

Loki narrowed his eyes. “You have?”

“Pass,” Darcy said. “Okay, seriously, do you actually have something to say or were you just trying to unnerve me by ambushing me in a dark corridor? And don’t tell me you didn’t realize how it’d come across, I’m not an idiot and neither are you.”

Loki shrugged. “I didn’t have a particular question. I was curious whether… whether you are afraid of me.”

“Good, we’ve cleared up that I’m not,” she said. “Can we go now?”

“Indeed,” he said with a small smile, a genuine one this time, and led the way into the elevator.
Avengers Tower

November 2011

“–belongs to the Sinaloa cartel,” Stark said.

He paused. Loki nodded to the scientist as he stepped out of the elevator on Darcy’s heels. She made a beeline for the seat they’d saved for her between Barnes and Natasha around the circular table. Loki found an empty chair a few seats to her right, with Bruce on his left and two spaces between himself and Maria Hill, who he suspected was not ready to fully accept his presence at these meetings.

“What kept you?” Stark said.

Loki wondered what Darcy would tell them.

“Jane,” she said easily. “She’s studying Loki’s teleporting. Got very excited.”

_Liar_, Loki thought with amusement. So she did not intend to mention how he’d challenged her outside the lab, in an area deliberately free of cameras. He’d learned what he wanted and then some: Darcy Lewis was not afraid of him beyond a wariness that was prudent given the circumstances he’d put her in. Loki found himself more relieved than he had expected about this revelation. And then there was her comment about “abusive dickweeds.” That required further contemplation, but not at this moment.

“Catch me up?” Darcy asked.

Clint sat forward, a few seats over on Maria’s other side. “Tony’s old drug buddies’ve been hearing rumors about a new product the Sinaloa cartel’s going to be running up here in the next few months. Sam talked to his contacts and got the location of the Sinaloa cartel’s known haunts in Latin America from the government.”

“Nice,” Darcy said appreciatively. “Do we know where they’re keeping this stuff?”

Stark swiveled a screen toward her. “Here. And now everyone’s caught up.”

“This is the warehouse the Sinaloa have been using to process and store their product, in preparation for sales. They’re trying to time the release with the New Year; people apparently like new things at the party and addicts on the streets are more desperate for fixes in the winter to escape their misery.” Rogers’ face tightened with unhappiness as he spoke.

“Clever,” Darcy muttered.

Half the team looked affronted.

She raised her hands. “I’m not saying I _like_ it, but it’s a wicked clever way of running sales.”

Loki hid his smile.

“So basically that means we have to hit fast and hard,” Stark said. “We’re going now.”

Darcy’s eyebrows almost reached her hairline.
“Suit up,” Steve said. “We can work out an assault plan on the plane. We can’t risk them moving even a small shipment of product out of that warehouse.”

Amidst the shuffle of chairs being pushed back and small conversations springing to life, Loki spoke up. “I’d like to accompany you.”

Everyone paused.

Rogers examined him with a stony expression. “You’ve no love for us, Loki. I don’t like going into battle with a soldier who might shoot me in the back, or vanish at any time.”

“There was no stipulation in our bargain that I cannot leave,” Loki said. “I could walk out of this tower right now and lose my safe asylum without violating any oath I made.”

Rogers looked as though he had tasted something sour.

“How is this helping your case exactly?” Stark asked.

Loki glanced around the table. Clint, Bruce, and Wilson were still surprised; Barnes and Natasha’s faces were inscrutable; Darcy looked almost happy. And Hill, interestingly, seemed to be considering it. “You lose nothing by bringing me along because I have no need to escape should I wish to leave your company.”

“He has a point,” Clint said.

“Why would you want to come?” Rogers asked.

Loki knew it was his opinion, ultimately, that would decide for the Avengers. “In all honesty, I am growing bored here. I appreciate the reprieve you have granted in accepting my bargain, but this tower can only entertain someone so long. Furthermore, it seems that Hydra has been colluding with Thanos, and if Thanos wants it to happen then I will do everything in my power to ensure that it does not.”

Rogers thought about it.

“Darcy?” Clint asked. “You’ve spent the most time with him.”

Darcy took a moment to assemble her thoughts. Norns, let her speak in my favor.

“Let him come,” she said. “He’ll only start causing us problems if we let him get too bored. But with some limitations.”

“I agree.”

That shocked the group. Including Loki. Because Maria Hill had spoken.

She was staring coolly at Loki.

“I hope you are not planning to shoot me in the midst of this firefight,” he said pleasantly.

“No.” Hill crossed her arms. Clint subtly shifted in a way that let Loki know he’d back Hill in this, though he and Loki had grown somewhat companionable in the last month. “I plan on finding out if I can trust you.”

“Brave of you,” he said.
“I’m still not sure.” Rogers stood up. “Loki, I’d like to think I can trust you, but I won’t bet on it.”

Darcy shared a loaded glance with Stark. Loki instantly went on edge.

“You’re too much of a wild card,” Rogers continued, “and we wouldn’t be able to tell where you are or what you’re doing.”

“Good thing I’ve been working on a way to track his magic. I can put a scanner in the jet that’ll pick up on everything he does, within its range.” Stark slapped a wrist cuff down on the table. “And if Loki puts this on we’ll know if he does anything more than change his eye color.”

Loki stared at the cuff. The pieces came together in an instant: this must have been why Darcy wanted to stay behind and speak with Jane, at least in part. He’d suspected something.

His first reaction was betrayal. He’d come to trust Darcy in some small indefinable way. And she turned around and threw this in his face with no warning. Loki controlled that reaction away. He’d have done the same in her position, and at least they were warning him; they could’ve just put the scanner in the jet and spied on him without his consent.

“We won’t force the cuff upon you,” Stark said to Loki evenly. “You’re right. You’re not a prisoner here. But if you want to come with us, I’m sure you see why we might ask some concessions of you.”

“I can,” Loki said slowly. He touched the cuff with his power, curious, but as far as he could determine there was nothing malicious about it. Its purpose seemed exactly what Stark had described: the detection of seidr.

Hill picked up the cuff and examined it in the conventional way. “He can take it off at any time?”

“If he’s within ten feet of the jet,” Stark replied. “It won’t be coming off during the fight, Maria, but Loki, you won’t be locked in. And it won’t limit you in any way.”

Loki cocked his head and studied Stark, wondering why the man was being so careful to not irritate him. Then he noticed Darcy, lurking in the background as she often did, looking pleased, and he knew she’d orchestrated this. Likely stepped in with Stark on Loki’s behalf even before this meeting, when they were developing the technology. Which was, admittedly, ingenious.

That, more than anything else, convinced him to hold out his hand to Hill. “I accept.”

Rogers frowned. Loki could practically see him stewing over the conversation and trying to find a reason to distrust him. He could understand Rogers’ hesitation, in truth; soldiers such as he were accustomed to fighting with those they trusted entirely. Stark and Hill were lone wolves, more likely to agree to this, but Rogers was used to leading a pack.

“You take my orders,” Rogers said finally. “Actually, you follow all of our orders. You come along, you’re the bottom of the ranks. We reserve the right to knock you out if we think you’re going off the rails.”

_I would not be so simple to disable._ “These are your terms?”

“Take it or leave it.” Rogers’ face was uncompromising.

“I accept,” Loki repeated, and buckled the cuff around his left wrist. It was smooth and heavy against his skin, nearly his own body temperature, reminding him that though he maintained an illusion approximating the body heat of Midgardians and Asgardians, he actually had a noticeably lower core
As a child, he’d thought it merely a product of his physique. Now that he knew it was due to his Jotun heritage, Loki did everything in his power to disguise every hint of other-ness. Best to avoid suspicion entirely.

“Suit up,” Rogers repeated. “Clint, can you find something for Loki?”

Hill, Barnes, and Natasha left the table almost immediately, though Natasha shot an assessing glance over her shoulder at Loki. He gave her a bland smile and she smirked at him before leaving the room. Rogers heaved a sigh and glanced around once more. “Don’t make me regret this,” he muttered in Loki’s general direction, and followed them.

“Do you need weapons? Armor? We can find you custom gear if you want to make a habit of this but for now you’re stuck with the generic stuff we have on hand,” Clint said.

“That will suffice.” Loki looked curiously around the armory. He’d never been in here before; the artificial intelligence that ran the Tower had judiciously kept him out of certain areas of even the top floors. He did not begrudge the Avengers their caution, though it was irritating to walk away from doors he could easily have bypassed had he not been actively avoiding their ire and suspicion.

“Catch.” Loki reflexively snagged the black bundle out of the air and raised his eyebrows; it was heavy.

“Midgardian men wear this in battle?”

“Too much for you, Twiggy?” Clint said with a challenging grin.

Loki glared. “I will not be assigned a foolish soldier’s moniker, as I understand is your custom,” he snapped. “It weighs less than half a set of Asgardian battle armor.”

“Twiggy,” Clint stage-whispered.

Loki paused halfway into settling the vest around his shoulders as he’d seen Barnes do. With a twist of his wrist and a few whispered words, Clint’s feet left the ground and he yelped, suspended in midair.

“You were saying?” Loki said with a benevolent smile, fastening the vest. It fit him well; Clint had performed his task with precision.

Clint flailed and spun in the air. “Okay, okay, you’ve made your point, put me down already, man!”

Loki abruptly cut off the spell.

Even caught off guard, Clint managed to flip and land on his feet. He squinted at Loki. “Sure I can’t call you Gravity Man?”

“Only marginally better,” Loki said, but he couldn’t quite hide his amusement. The man really was irrepressible.

Clint clapped him on the shoulder. There was wariness in his gaze, but camaraderie as well. He was not so comfortable as Darcy, but that would come in time; the one-time SHIELD agent had shown no hesitation at occupying a space filled with deadly weaponry, Loki, and no backup. “Let’s go, the
Loki considered the armory as he and Clint made the short trip up to the hangar. It seemed personalized to this small team; knives, firearms, grenades, and other, stranger contraptions lined the walls in customized racks with faint backlight. Well-organized shelves of ammunition occupied the space beneath the bench that ran around three sides of the room. The back third was taken up with tact clothing, including a collection of vests similar to Loki’s, all outfitted to hold a variety of weapons. There were also spare pairs of the trousers Clint had given him: black, durable, and padded at the knees, they were nonetheless fitted and light enough to provide a full range of motion. Small cargo-style pockets on the thighs allowed for more storage, and concealed knife and gun holsters sat just inside the tops of the boots. Loki was newly aware of the array of deadly weaponry that Clint, Barnes, Hill, and Natasha carried into any given fight.

He’d chosen two long knives, double-edged and wickedly sharp, that were at present strapped to his ribs. More blades waited in the vest and in his boots, and a small one was concealed in the waist of his trousers. The belt itself doubled as a whip; Clint had shown him how to quickly change the shape of its buckle into a handle. The shirt that went beneath the vest had been slightly short in the arms before Loki used *seidr* to make it fit properly. It, too, was black and fitted, made of a wicking fabric. He had only two firearms, a small one called a ‘pistol’ in a holster on his thigh and a larger one Clint had called an AR-15 on his back. Loki wasn’t particularly familiar with these Midgardian weapons, though he appreciated their efficient brutality and was confident he could pick it up fairly quickly.

Besides, his main weapon was *seidr*. He didn’t need to rely on the humans’ killing tools if he did not want to.

When he and Clint stepped onto the jet, Loki paused. Bruce Banner sat with Stark off to the side. Clint, too, seemed surprised. “I thought you didn’t like combat,” he said.

Barnes and Natasha were sitting on a bench across from Bruce. They both examined Loki while Bruce replied, “Someone had to stay in the air and watch the scanners for magic, and I thought you’d want to join the action, Clint.”

Clint grinned. “Thanks, man. You’re not gonna go green on us, are you? Might make things unnecessarily complicated.”

“If he has to,” Rogers said from the cockpit. He swiveled the seat and climbed out. “She’s prepped for takeoff, Clint, and JARVIS is synched in via satellite. We’re good to go.”

“Copy that.” Clint headed for the copilot’s seat. Rogers clapped him on the shoulder as they passed one another—it seemed to be a masculine greeting or form of affection, particularly among soldierly types, on Midgard—and Natasha seemed busy adjusting her thermosuit and the weapons buckled across her torso or to the belt slung around her hips.

Loki settled onto the bench across from Natasha and Barnes, leaving several feet between himself and Bruce so he did not intrude on the scientist’s personal space. He took a moment to glance around the jet, having never been in one of the Avengers’ custom transports.

It was shaped rather like the cross that was attached to the religion of Christianity—Loki had been reading several books Darcy recommended him on this realm’s religions, of which there were dozens. (He’d been very amused by the depiction of himself, Thor, and Odin in Norse mythology.) The long base of the cross was a tapering space in the back of the jet, lined with compartments and benches; this was where Loki sat with Bruce, Stark, Natasha, and Barnes, who was still giving Loki unreadable looks from across the open space. Each of the cross’ sides was a small private space on
one side of the jet, set slightly behind the front cockpit area. Loki could hear Hill moving around the
one on his side of the jet, and Rogers was in the other, examining something on a screen on the wall
and speaking quietly to the artificial intelligence system with Wilson by his side.

Loki slowly sat back in his seat. He realized… he was looking forward to this battle. It would most
likely be simple, as he would be fighting Midgardians beside a group of the best warriors this realm
had to offer, but beyond that, he knew that their fighting styles were so diverse that none of them
would mock him for his own. So unlike Thor and Sif and the “Warriors Three”. Loki scoffed
internally at the nickname, as he always did.

Then Barnes stood up and casually hurled a knife at Loki’s head.
Several things happened at once.

Before he even saw his blade find its target, Bucky was thrown back and his head hit the metal wall. Loki held a knife to his throat, face terrifyingly blank. Bucky thrashed but his limbs were pinned in place by a force he couldn’t see. A siren wailed and people shouted and Natasha was shooting at Loki but her bullets simply stopped in midair a foot from his skin. Steve lunged for Loki’s back and froze in midair.

“Everyone shut up!” Banner bellowed, his voice unnaturally deep.

Natasha, Steve, and Clint fell silent. Stark was banging around up near the cockpit. Bucky had a hard time focusing on any of it because he couldn’t remember ever being this terrified.

Here was an enemy against whom he had no defense.

But Loki hadn’t killed him yet.

“Loki,” Clint said steadily. “Loki, maybe let him explain.”

The Asgardian’s expression did not change. Bucky had never seen anyone so close to violence look that cold. It was a harsh reminder that Loki wasn’t human.

He slowly stepped back, lowering the knife from Bucky’s throat. Bucky felt his chest heaving with the adrenaline but he still couldn’t move.

“Let me down,” he rasped. His throat hurt from the throw.

Loki sheathed his blade. “You are in no position to be giving orders, Barnes.”

Stark finally managed to get the damn siren to shut up. In its absence their voices sounded unnaturally loud. Bucky’s ears seemed to be hissing.

The rest of the Avengers gathered around Loki and Bucky, faces wary and weapons ready. Stark had his gauntlets on, Natasha and Steve had drawn their guns, and Clint had his bow ready but no arrow nocked. Even Banner’s hands were fists, but based on his body language he’d jump in to protect Loki’s back, not Clint’s. Bucky couldn’t even blame him. Loki hadn’t fired the first metaphorical shot.

“Oh, you know, this is a pretty unique situation.” Stark said, stepping slowly forward until he was between Loki and Bucky but not quite blocking Loki’s line of fire. Bucky could see the archer’s pulse jumping in his neck. Clint’s movements were slow and steady, like he was trying not to spook an animal. “Loki. Hold off while we let him explain.”

“I could simply take the answers from his mind,” Loki said.

Natasha tensed.

“Pauk,” Bucky said. “No.”
He knew, better than before, that even he and Pauk couldn’t stand against Loki.

Slowly, she slid her gun back into its holster on her thigh.

“If you were gonna do that, you would’ve already,” Clint pointed out.

“Explain yourself then,” Loki said to Barnes.

Bucky took a breath. “You never train. Not once in the months I’ve been in the Tower. I was testing your reflexes.”

Impossibly, Loki’s face got colder. Bucky realized he was insulted. “You’re going into a fight with us. I wasn’t going to let you watch my back, or Natasha’s, until I knew you were still battle ready.”

“And have I passed your test, you fool?” Loki sneered.

“Yes.” Barnes stared him down. Something in his gut told him the only way to get out of this was to not back down. He didn’t regret having thrown that knife, and he needed Loki to see it.

For a long minute, everything balanced on a knife’s edge.

Natasha broke the silence, raising a hand and delicately rubbing her left temple. “Zima. Remember how we were talking about behaviors that don’t work around people? This is one of them.”

“Dude, if you think throwing knives is a good way to work with allies, you maybe need a therapist,” Clint added. Stark chuckled.

Some of the tension bled from Loki’s posture.

Bucky took his first full breath in over a minute as the force pinning him in place released and he slid down onto the bench. His legs were unsteady but he forced them to straighten and carry him across the plane, where he yanked his knife out of the wall and returned it to his vest.

_Swallow your pride._

“I’m sorry,” he said roughly, meeting Loki’s eyes. “It won’t happen again.”

Then he turned to glare at Clint. “And _I_ don’t need a therapist.”

Clint raised his hands. “Whatever you say, man. I just fly the plane.” He glanced at Loki. “Want to sit up front with me? View’s better.”

“I would prefer to,” Loki said, and followed Clint to the front of the plane with a last glare for Bucky. As he walked away, collective tension released with every step.

Stark shook his head. “And here I thought we’d need a leash on _Loki._”

“I apologized,” Bucky said.

“Band-aid on a broken window,” Maria told him bluntly. By mutual, unspoken agreement, they kept their voices low. “It shouldn’t have happened in the first place.”

“It won’t happen again,” Bucky repeated.

Natasha crossed the space between them and laid a hand on his prosthetic arm. The sensation was odd, new. He still wasn’t completely adjusted to the increased sensitivity of Stark’s much-improved
prosthesis; looking down and seeing skin tones instead of steel plates caught him off guard every time. “He’s still adjusting,” Natasha said. “We’ll talk about it later.”

Finality rang in her voice.

Steve accepted it. “Okay,” he said, and his eyes met Bucky’s. “You’re all right?”

“Fine,” Bucky said, and glanced toward the cockpit. Loki’s dark hair showed over the copilot’s seat. “I wouldn’t have done it if I’d known…” How powerful he is.

He didn’t need to finish his sentence; they got it. “I couldn’t touch him,” Natasha murmured.

Steve looked down, flexed his left hand. “Holding me in midair like that? Weirdest thing I’ve ever felt. It wasn’t like being weightless. I could feel gravity on me, and no ground under my feet, and no invisible hands or anything holding me up, but I wasn’t falling.”

“Siphoning your kinetic energy, maybe?” Stark mused, eyeing Loki consideringly. “Just enough to keep you in place. Or maybe the pressure was so dilute, spread out over your body, so you didn’t notice. Or—”

“Speculate later, Tony,” Maria interrupted. “Do we still bring him along?”

“I don’t see how to leave him behind,” Steve muttered. “Even if we wanted to.”

“You do realize this proves his point about the invasion of New York, right?”

Everyone swiveled to look at Banner.

He strengthened under their scrutiny. Bucky remembered how his voice had gotten deep, and the hunched, bestial posture that had seized the scientist’s frame in that tense moment surrounding Loki. Banner was more than he seemed.

“He really was occupied fighting for his mind,” Banner continued, folding his arms across his chest. “And holding himself back. He just neutralized our entire team with no apparent effort and one visible weapon that didn’t even draw blood. You really think we’d have won against him and his army if he’d been committed?”

Steve blew out a sigh. “Good point.”

“There’s not a lot we can do,” Natasha said. “It’s like tying an eagle down with a spiderweb. He can take off anytime; he’s just choosing not to.”

“I wonder why,” Steve murmured, eyes sharp on the cockpit.

Bruce’s voice was sharper as he snapped, “Really? You can’t even guess?” Bucky found himself mildly surprised. The scientist had always seemed so… so mild until now. He’d known of the other man’s alter ego, but it seemed there was something of a gradient between the two, rather than a single precise divide. “Maybe it’s because he’s actually come to feel something like fondness for us,” Bruce continued. “Maybe he’s trying to do something other than haunt the tower and make vaguely threatening semi-joking commentary during all our meetings. Maybe he kept his abilities a secret because he’s used to people taking off because they get terrified of him.”

There was a long silence.

“Like they do you?” Natasha asked evenly.
Bucky resisted the urge to square up with her and with Steve. Even Wilson, who’d proven to be good in a fight. For a normal person. He didn’t need to antagonize everyone. More than he already had. He stomped on his guilt (so maybe he’d overreacted a little; maybe he still needed to… readjust… to society) and held his feet still.

“Yes. Like they do to me,” Bruce said bitterly. “And you. Black Widow. I’ve read the files. And Captain America, the Allies’ poster boy; they never see you for who you are, do they? Just as their idol. And the Winter Soldier.” His eyes, green but a different shade from Loki’s (more toxic than inhuman), fixed on Bucky, who wanted to step back. “What do you think they’ll do when they find out who you are? Accept you? Ha.” He shook his head. “I’m not the only monster on this plane. Neither is Loki. I’m not saying he’s a good person. But I can’t blame him for letting us underestimate him, and if you do, you’re the worst kind of hypocrite.”

He turned on his heel and stalked into the left-side niche of the plane.

“Drama in the sky,” Stark commented after a second. “Does this count as joining the mile-high club? I feel like it should. I mean, like I wasn’t already, but I’m guessing the rest of you haven’t joined up yet. Hadn’t. It’s mostly a sex thing but does everyone almost dying count?”

Maria shook her head.

“Is he always like this?” Wilson asked no one in particular.

Natasha’s lips twitched, overhearing. “Unfortunately.”

“Hey,” Stark protested.

“Heyyyy,” Wilson said. “So how about this. We all don’t piss off Bruce any more, Barnes, you quit randomly trying to assassinate the alien magician prince person, and let’s finish mission prep? Steve, you want to go over those attack plans with everyone, or are we just going to let them improvise?”

Bucky bit back irritation that Steve had been sharing with Wilson alone. He had no right to be possessive.

“Yeah,” Steve said after a second. “Yeah, I’ll… call them up. Someone want to bring Loki and Clint and Bruce in on this?”

“Bruce? I thought he’s noncombatant on this one,” Maria said.

Steve shrugged. “He should still know what’s going on.”

Maria shrugged. “I’ll do it. Since I seem to be the only person capable of not starting interpersonal fires.”

“To be fair, this is a volatile group,” Wilson said.

“I’ve got Clint and Loki,” Natasha said smoothly.

Steve glanced her way. “You sure?”

She nodded.

He accepted it without hesitation and retreated towards the right-side wall, where Bucky had been pinned moments before, and paused. “Tony, can you, uh…”
“I got you, Grandpa,” Stark said with a grin, and made the wall turn into a screen somehow.

Bucky sat down opposite the screen while Stark and Steve started bickering over something. Maria headed for the spot where Banner had retreated out of sight and Natasha for the cockpit. Bucky wanted to go and provide her backup but he knew he wouldn’t be wanted. Would probably make things harder for her.

Wilson dropped down next to him. “So I don’t know if anyone’s told you this, but I’ve kind of made a career out of helping people with PTSD,” he said without preamble.

Bucky gave him a side-eye. “I thought you were a soldier.”

“No shit, you think I could fly that thing without serious training?” Wilson asked, gesturing toward the wingsuit hanging near the screen. Bucky had to admit he had a point. The wingsuit looked… complicated, at the very least. “But everyone’s gotta have something other than fighting to think about, or they pretty much lose their empathy.”

“And you believe I am past that point,” Bucky said flatly. He really shouldn’t be surprised; Banner had said as much, and Wilson had blood on his hands but no more than any ordinary soldier, not like the stains the Winter Soldier had taken–

“Idiot. No, I don’t, or I wouldn’t be working with you,” Wilson snapped.

Bucky glanced at him before he controlled his reaction away.

“Look.” Wilson sighed sharply through his nose. “Lots of soldiers come home and they can’t deal with living like a normal person. Guns under their pillows, coming out swinging when their husbands or wives wake them up. That kind of shit. PTSD comes in lots of clothes and yours would definitely be weird, seeing as Hydra obviously did some experimentation and the whole amnesia thing. But anyway. One symptom is… inability to trust. Another one is the whole inability to assimilate thing.” He studied Bucky’s face, but if Wilson was looking for a reaction, he wouldn’t get one. Bucky committed his words to memory so he could think on them later. When he was alone. When he could be vulnerable with no one to see.

“So what I’m saying is, if you need help… you can talk to me,” Wilson finished. “I’ve had my own demons to wrangle. I can’t beat yours into submission for you, but I can maybe hand you a club to do it yourself.”

“What if I’m really… broken? What if I can’t be that guy he remembers? That hero,” Bucky found himself saying. What is wrong with me why am I opening up like this–

“’Course you’re not,” Wilson said. So easily. “People don’t change, but they can change what they do with what they are. War tends to do that.” He paused. “I haven’t known Steve all that long, I guess, but he’s different too. So maybe don’t be so quick to assume we’ll all hate you.”

Bucky thought about the dreams he’d been having since their… talk… with Zola. The scientist in the computers. (His skin crawled just thinking about it.) Something was wrong. There was some memory he couldn’t quite reach, but something his subconscious seemed to think was important.

But if Wilson was right (and he did have experience with war trauma) then Bucky knew it was wishful thinking to expect his crimes to stay buried. He’d have to deal with them. Eventually. But not yet.

So he just sat there, cold and closed, until Wilson gave up and shifted away.
En Route to Sinaloa Warehouse

November 2011

“Clint. Loki.” Natasha eased into the space between them.

Loki glanced over at her, face inscrutable, before he looked back out the cockpit. “Romanoff.”

“We were doing so well with the first names,” she said, a wry smile twisting her lips. “Don’t quit on me now.”

“Usage of one’s given name is an informality I reserve for those whose closest associates do not make habits of throwing knives at me,” Loki said.

Natasha held back a sigh. He’d gone straight back to prickly and formal, retreating behind the walls she’d watched slowly coming down. She hadn’t been in the Tower when he first showed up, but assumed it must’ve been something like this: indifference or vague amusement on his face, formal language and aloof posture holding everyone at arm’s length. It was a defense mechanism, not too different from her own.

“Technically he only did it this one time, so I don’t know if you can call it a habit,” Clint observed.

Loki cast him a sharp glance. “I see. You are… tag-teaming me, to use a phrase you will comprehend.”

“Oh, stop with the supremacist bullshit,” Natasha said, faintly exasperated. “I’m not going to apologize for him, but I will try to make you understand that he’s having a tough time adjusting. And he wouldn’t walk into battle with an unprepared, untested… ally… at his back.”

“I understand perfectly well,” Loki said smoothly. “That is why the good James Barnes still breathes.”

Clint shook his head. “Dude, I’m not sure how you pulled it back, but I like you, so please don’t ruin that now by killing Natasha’s boyfriend. Things might get awkward.”

“Do not allow it to occur again,” Loki said.

“It won’t.” Natasha glanced back. “Sam’s talking to him. He’s dealt with adjustment issues before.”

Loki’s interest was brief, and quickly hidden, but she played roles for a living just as much as he did, and she caught it. “And you, Agent Romanoff?” he asked. “What of your own ‘adjustment issues,’ as you so aptly phrased it?”

She gave him a smile that was all teeth and no humor. “I had help too. You’re sitting next to him. My issues are quite firmly under control. Can’t say the same for you.”

“God of Chaos, do you not remember?” Loki said. “I exist to keep things interesting for you mortals.”
“Well, you’re doing a stellar job,” Clint said. “No, don’t touch that, you’ll blow up the plane.”

Loki pulled his hand away from the dashboard. “You jest.”

“Half of it,” Clint said.

“Why does that button even exist?” Natasha asked.

“Long story involving weird leech-drone things from China.”

“Say what now?”

Clint snickered. “There are parts of my life you don’t know about, okay, Natasha?”

“There shouldn’t be,” she said, faintly indignant. How had he gone on missions involving leech drones that she hadn’t heard about?

“Not that this domestic squabble is not amusing,” Loki cut in smoothly, “but if you must continue, I must beg to be excused.” His tone made it clear he wasn’t making a request.

“Chill,” Clint said lightly. He glanced over. “Fine, Tasha, what was Bruce talking about? Seemed like he was getting a little… heated.”

“JARVIS didn’t tell you?” Natasha asked.

The AI joined their conversation. “Unless the topic of discussion contains information pertaining to a threat to Mr. Stark or his associated interests, I am not at liberty to share the contents of private discussions.”

“Except with Tony,” Clint said.

“Mr. Stark has clearance allowing him access to any of my files at any time,” JARVIS said tonelessly.

“Well, in case you were curious,” Loki said, “Banner seems to have taken umbrage with a comment made by Rogers, and quite enthusiastically exposed the hypocrisy of Romanoff, Barnes, or Rogers should they be angry with me for… understating… my abilities. Given that they do the same.”

Natasha stared at him. “You heard us?”

“Evidently,” he responded, voice quite dry.

“Even my ears aren’t that good,” she said speculatively.

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Forgetting Banner’s tirade so easily, Black Widow?”

“Hardly,” she said. “I’ve got red in my ledger and I know I’ll never wipe it out.” It was a reference to their conversation on the helicarrier, deliberately dropped to bring back a moment of connection between them, no matter how complicated and baggage-laden that moment might be. “Bruce is right. I can’t blame you. I am curious as to what, precisely, your limits are.”

“Same,” Clint muttered. “If only so I can avoid them.”

“You have not seen them reached yet,” Loki said. “Neither those on my power, nor those on my tolerance.”
It was a warning, and not a subtle one. She considered pushing him on it, but decided her goal right now was to smooth things over, not stir up his issues (that could come later, when they weren’t on the verge of a big mission and he could deal with his demons in relative peace) so she backed off.

“He was right, you know,” Natasha said instead. “You might think yourself a monster or a god, but you’re far from the only one on this plane with depths people run from.”

“*Do* you think you’re a god?” Clint asked frankly. Natasha would have to thank him later for playing along with her so well. His easy manner and well-timed interjections kept things balanced. Kept Loki at ease. Relatively. “Or a monster? Or something else?”

Loki shrugged. “Cannot one be both?” he said, with a twist to his lips that Natasha didn’t quite understand. There was some meaning layered into that sentence, something big and important and significant only to him.

But Loki blinked and recovered himself, and the hint of something more was gone. “Mortals see me as god or monster because my power is so beyond their ken,” he said arrogantly. “Particularly when last I visited this realm, in your species’ youth. Now I would be considered monster more than god.” Again, that hidden connotation…

“Lumped in with the rest of you,” he said, black humor coloring his words.

Natasha smiled grimly. He wasn’t wrong. “Guess that’s why we get along so well.”

“You call that little scene ‘getting along’?” Loki asked incredulously. “I would hate to experience your definition of ‘conflict,’ then.”

At least he was dropping the formality, a little. Progress.

“You at least got why he did it,” Clint pointed out. “So did I. There’s not a whole lot of people on this planet–realm, whatever–who would. Not sure what that says about me, that I understand the ninety-year-old assassin and the ancient space dude, but probably nothing good. How old are you anyway? Two hundred? Three? Wait, you were a Norse god, so…”

“By your years…” Loki paused to consider. “At least one thousand years of age. Perhaps older. I am not entirely comfortable converting between my calendar and yours.”

Clint’s mouth was open a little. He closed it. “That’s… uh. Okay.”

*Less concerning now that I have such a hard time reading him,* Natasha realized. *Given that he’s had centuries of practice, it’s probably an accomplishment I can get anything out of him at all.*

“God or monster?” Loki said with a razor-sharp smile.

“If you’re what’s called a monster, or a god, then I’m not much impressed with either,” Clint said, grinning at Loki. “Softie. You wouldn’t kill me. Stop posturing already.”

Loki blinked. Paused. “You mortals are…truly quite fascinating creatures. There are Aesir and Vanir, Alvar and Muspellir, even, who would not dare speak to me as you do.”

“I’m shaking in my boots,” Clint said, waggling a foot between his seat and Loki’s. “See? Terrifying.”

“I could kill you easily,” Loki said.

Natasha did her best to fade into the background. This was Clint’s show now. She’d set him up; now
he could work his magic on Loki like only Hawkeye could.

“Yeah, but I’m ninety-five percent sure you won’t, and I pretty much have a five percent chance of dying on any given day, so it doesn’t change a whole lot,” Clint said flippantly.

Loki frowned. “Your mathematical language does not translate very well through Allspeak, but I do not believe that is a sound calculation—”

“Shut up and go with it,” Clint said.

Natasha knew Loki was picking through Clint’s possible meanings, looking for traps and hidden layers. It was what she would’ve done. What she did reflexively in any conversation. But Clint was guileless, and genuine in this case, and it seemed to work on Loki. Seemed to convince him that Clint really meant it: he wouldn’t take off in fear just because Loki was stronger than they’d thought.

The Asgardian at last dropped his walls slightly. “Fair enough,” he said, and a slight smile curled his lips.

“Who would’ve thought you would find friends on Midgard?” Natasha asked with a return smile.

Loki shrugged. Always graceful. “No one who was even passingly familiar with my reputation.”

“Don’t worry, I’m still not over the surprise,” Clint said.

“Miss Romanoff, Mr. Barton, Loki–I believe the rest of your team is assembling to prepare for the imminent operation,” JARVIS interrupted.

“Right.” Natasha glanced over her shoulder. Sam and Zima were done talking to each other; Zima’s shoulders and mouth were set in firm and uncompromising lines. He’d have to stew over whatever offer or help Sam had offered for a while; she’d let him think on it. Maria had reengaged Bruce, who was heading back as well and whose eyes were thankfully back to his normal brown. Tony was still sniping back and forth with Steve, but it seemed good-natured, and the satellite imagery was up and ready on the wall. “You say you’re a military strategist?” she said to Loki. “Want to prove it?”

“I would prefer to observe the tactical prowess of your team firsthand,” Loki said. “I was… otherwise engaged… during New York, and though I do not expect resistance here to be of the same scale, it should still be a fascinating study.”

“JARVIS, you’ve got the cockpit,” Clint said, climbing out of his seat. “You know, it’s not really comforting when you talk about us like bugs under a microscope, oh high-and-mighty Asser.”

“Aesir,” Loki corrected, and again something about his expression when he said it betrayed a hidden meaning. Natasha looked away so he wouldn’t notice her irritation that all she could get out of him was a hint of something below the surface.

Over a thousand years old, Nat. Not your fault. And he definitely wouldn’t take well to more questions. So she let it alone, for now.

“Right. That. My point stands.”

“I have little experience with Midgardians,” Loki said with a shrug. “Can I not be interested?”

Clint shook his head. “You’re so damn weird.”

Loki looked slightly offended.
“Coming from him, that’s a compliment,” Natasha assured him, and led the way back to the group.

Chapter End Notes

Gratuitous chapter number 2 of the day because somehow I reached 100 chapters?? I don't even know when that happened! Thanks to the two people who mentioned it in the comments on the last chapter! This fic has gotten *wildly* out of hand in terms of length and plot and I'm so excited by where it's going and also by the amazing response I've gotten. It surprises me every time people comment or leave kudos :D Thanks to all of you who read and enjoy Cruel Vengeance!
Chapter 102

[Classified Location], Sinaloa Warehouse, Mexico

November 2011

Loki promptly decided that the desert was his least favorite of all the Midgardian ecosystems he’d encountered this far.

It was the sand, mostly, and the wind. He could tell the sun and heat would be unbearable in the summer, though now, verging on winter, there was only a mild bite to the air this evening. Mild, that is, to him. He supposed it could be more bothersome to the others, given that they were mortals, not Jotnar.

He brushed a layer of sand off of his arms and curled his lips.

“We go in thirty seconds,” Rogers said over their comms. “Loki, your disguise will hold up to cameras?”

“Yes,” he said, biting back impatience. They’d been over this already.

“Everything looks normal,” Bruce said. “On scans. They’re winding down for the night.”

“Perfect.”

Loki glanced to his left and right. The Avengers had decided on greater subtlety than their last assault, the one on the Hydra base in Europe. They’d be hijacking a supply truck.

“Truck’s coming,” Bruce said.

“Everyone ready,” Rogers ordered.

Loki drew an illusion about himself of an olive-skinned man, shorter than himself and stouter, with wider-set eyes and much shorter hair.

“Creepy,” Clint muttered next to him.

Loki sighed. “You work with a man who turns into an eight-foot-tall ‘rage monster,’ as your files so charmingly phrased it, yet you say I am the creepy one.”

“Yeah, Gamma is just frightening,” Clint said seriously, sticking to their call signs.

“Hey,” Bruce protested.

“I wanna be frightening,” Stark interjected.

Clint snorted. “You’re too obnoxious.”

“Ouch,” Stark said. Loki couldn’t see him; he was hiding on the other side of a sand dune across the dirt road, given that his suit was far from subtle. “You wound me.”

“You’ll survive,” Rogers cut in, amusement in his voice. “Stow it, guys, time to go.”

Loki felt the truck coming. Flexed his fingers. Rogers hadn’t liked this part of the plan; it crossed
some kind of moral line in his head, but he had eventually weighed efficiency over the questionable nature of Loki’s proposal, for which Loki respected him. Though he had perhaps led Rogers to believe it would not harm the driver at all, which was not… precisely… true. He wouldn’t feel pain. But neither would he—or she, Loki supposed—experience no side effects whatsoever.

“Magician, you ready?” Rogers asked.

“Indeed,” Loki said with a sharp smile. It felt good to be doing something of use once more. Or at least engaging.

He walked out into the center of the road and waited.

The truck rattled forward and slowed when it was perhaps fifty meters away. Loki used a combination of illusion and acting to appear stumbling, weak, sunburned, and desperate. Playing to the driver’s compassion.

Sure enough, the truck began to creep forward. Stopped again only forty feet from Loki.

“Help,” he called out, in a rasping, weak voice. “Please… Water…”

The driver climbed out, gun at the ready but not aimed at Loki, and began to approach. “Hola,” he called. Another language—Spanish, of the Mexican variant. Translated into Allspeak as “What are you doing out here?”

Too easy, Loki thought.

“Using you,” he said with a grin, and leaned on his Allspeak so the man would hear it as his native language. “Let us into your truck.” He pressed power into his voice, trust me, you want to help us, it’s in your best interest.

The man blinked. “Uh. Okay, sure. How many…”

His voice trailed off as Loki signaled the rest of the team. They emerged from the dunes and scrub grass around the road and converged on the truck.

The driver stood there, turned eagerly to Loki. He wasn’t very old, even by Midgardian standards. Face round and unlined.

Perhaps I pushed somewhat harder than was necessary.

“Drive us to the warehouse,” Loki ordered. “Inform no one of our presence.”

“Got it,” the kid said, and sprang eagerly back into the cab of his truck.

Loki climbed into the back with the rest of his team.

“Do I want to know how you did that?” Rogers asked.

“I did not reach into his mind, if that is what you are asking,” Loki said. “I simply… persuaded him.”

Maria shook her head.

“They didn’t train us for this,” Clint muttered.

“But it’s damn useful,” Natasha pointed out, and nodded to Loki. He could barely see her in the dim storage container on the back of the truck, but her expression seemed… approving.
Not surprising, that the Black Widow did not disagree with his tactics.

Rogers was still frowning, but he said no more beyond a brief command to not converse. Loki settled back against the rattling wall of the truck and tried to ignore the uncomfortably stale air in the compartment, the sand that chafed already inside his boots and the cuffs of his shirt.

He was decidedly not fond of the desert.

The ride in the stale, shaking truck stretched long enough to make Loki’s bones ache from the rattling and his mind numb from boredom. He was sorely tempted to cast an illusion of snakes or spiders or piling sand to cause some mild chaos, but given that he was skating on thin ice, he resisted the urge and resolved to perhaps work some mischief once they returned to the Tower. It had been too long since he indulged the aspect of his personality that had gained him the title “Trickster”.

Perhaps he could even do so with Darcy’s assistance.

Loki was momentarily pleased by the prospect, and then furious at himself for being pleased. Not only would this attachment be a weakness to be exploited, but it was seven kinds of foolish: he had millenia remaining in his lifespan, barring any unfortunate accidents, while Midgardians had mere decades. And simply using a Midgardian woman to satisfy physical pleasures was base and crude in a way Loki preferred never to behave. Such action was much more Thor’s prerogative than his own. Perhaps Thor was even engaged to Sif now, or another maiden appropriately Asgardian.

*There are the apples of Idunn,* he couldn’t help thinking. *Perhaps–*

But no. That was idiotic. Very, very idiotic. Loki clenched his right hand. He would not allow himself to grow so attached to any of these mortals that he would offer them one of the Apples.

Love was a weakness; he’d learned that lesson too well already.

Loki couldn’t quite resolve to break himself away from Darcy entirely—she had grown closest to him by far—but he did decide, firmly, that he would not allow their… friendship… to develop any further.

Really, he should leave now, before he became too fond of any of these mortals. They would die in the blink of an eye while he remained unchanged. It was like to a fruit fly gaining sentience and befriend a human for the few days of its life.

But he was genuinely interested, perhaps even invested, in the Avengers’ crusade and in Midgard’s development. This realm was trembling on the edge of entering the Nine Realms as a force to be considered in its own right, a sovereign species, young and ambitious. The humans were encountering offrealm entities for the first time since they’d gained the capacity to search for comprehension, and truly enhanced humans were beginning to play a more significant role in Midgard’s politics and culture. It was a time of flux; when Loki reached out into Yggdrasil he could feel the infinite possibilities spooling out into the future, though he lacked the gift of walking between them as his mother—Frigga—did. And he was at its center.

*I shall stay,* then, he determined.

Rogers’ posture changed. Loki refocused on the interior of the transport vehicle. “Almost there,” Rogers said in a hushed voice. “Everyone set? You know your targets?”

A round of affirmatives went through the cabin. Loki made sure he knew precisely which illusions to cast that would allow himself, Rogers, and Clint to walk into the compound unobstructed. Stark and Wilson were providing air support, cruising the perimeter to make sure no one made it off the facility and coordinate with UN forces or Mexican authorities should any arrive. Barnes, Natasha, and Hill
would begin hitting the sleeping quarters and the main dining area, where satellite imaging had revealed most of the cartel’s employees congregated at this time of the evening. Their distraction would allow Loki’s team to infiltrate the building and verify the size and location of the drug stores, which would determine their next move.

The truck rolled to a halt.

Loki heard shouting in the language of this country; it took only a simple working to translate. “The driver is speaking with the guard at the gate,” he murmured into his earpiece. “Bantering, primarily.” He paused. “We have been waved through.”

The truck began to pull forward.

“Aren’t you useful,” Clint drawled.

Loki gave Clint his blandest smile.

The truck stopped again. Its engine powered off. Rogers made a chopping motion across his throat that Loki took to mean *no talking* and gestured at the back of the truck.

Loki carefully hid the sound they made shifting into formation and cast an illusion hiding the group from notice.

The doors were hauled open.

The Avengers flinched. Loki shook his head. They had no faith in his *seidr* yet.

Cartel members, wearing sweat-stained, sandy, layered cotton clothing with weapons that even Loki could tell were poor quality slung over their backs, began climbing into the truck. One by one, his teammates relaxed fractionally as they accepted that no one would notice them and slipped out of the truck around the edges of the opening.

As Loki passed the driver, he murmured, “Go find a vehicle, drive to the nearest town, get some rest, and forget you ever saw us,” with a little more power in his voice. The kid nodded as though his head were on a hinge and took off at a jog around the corner of the truck. Hopefully sleeping would mitigate the effects of Loki’s persuasion, which he knew from experience could leave his targets with headaches, temporary aimlessness or forgetfulness, and on two memorable occasions, a tendency to speak in tongues they did not understand. Those had been extreme situations, however, and he did not expect the young Sinaloa man to suffer from sudden fluency in Sirren.

They congregated behind a long, low building used for storing vehicles.

“Strike team, you ready?” Rogers asked.

Hill glanced at Barnes and Natasha, who nodded. “Ready,” she said.

“Once the first grenade hits, we’ll wait thirty seconds and then go,” Steve said, looking at Loki and Clint for confirmation. “Exit plan still to be determined.”

“Bruce, have you heard from the UN troops?” Clint asked.

The comms crackled, and Bruce’s voice joined back in. “-hear you–interference–stationed five miles out–orders–”

Rogers frowned. “Interference…”
“Hydra’s protecting their asset,” Natasha said grimly. “Probably gave the Sinaloa a little help with their jamming tech. Nothing the cartels use can match what we have. We should operate on the assumption that they can hear us, too. Ironside, Falcon, do you copy?”

Nothing.

“They are obviously outside communications range,” Loki said. “We should proceed as quickly as possible, before they begin to wonder what is wrong and come looking.”

“Okay.” Rogers grimaced. “I don’t like it, but we can make this work. Assume exit plan A until further notice.”

“Copy that.” Hill looked around. She’d been given informal command over the strike team for the sake of precision. “Move it out.”

Natasha, Barnes, and Hill disappeared around the edge of the garage. Loki pulled his working back from them. Focused on Clint and Rogers and making sure the three of them would appear as members of the cartel. It took time to develop new, unique faces, but Loki simply borrowed the appearances of several cartel members he’d seen near the truck and added a red armband to each.

“I’m going to cast the illusion,” he said quietly. “We will be unfamiliar to one another, but for red armbands on the left biceps. Use that as identification should we be separated, or should you forget which face belongs to your teammate and which to our opponents.”

“And we have to stay near you,” Clint checked, though they’d gone over it on the jet. “Or the illusions will fade.”

Not quite true, but Loki refused to allow them to know his full capacity as of yet, so he nodded.

“There is a certain range depended on what else I am doing while maintaining the illusion, yes. It is best if you stay within twenty feet of me, or within my sight.”

“Cool,” Clint said, bouncing on his toes. “Go for it, Magic Man.”

“You will not nickname me,” Loki said flatly, and cast the illusion.

Seconds later, the first explosion sent shivers through the building before them.

Loki took a deep breath in through his nose and out through his mouth. It felt good to cycle all the air in his lungs.

Rogers and Clint, looking for all the world like members of the cartel to any non-mage, readied themselves.

“Go,” Rogers said, and they broke into a run.
Avengers Tower

November 2011

Jane hated worrying.

She couldn’t even quite bring herself to focus on any of her recent work, though Loki’s magery had resulted in some absolutely fascinating new theories, not even related to Einstein-Rosen bridges but to dark matter and Higgs-Boson particles and the fields they generated that mysteriously created the property known as “mass”—but while the lure of her science sat there, she couldn’t really dive into it. Not like normal.

“Something’s wrong with me,” she hissed, pacing around her lab.

Not two minutes later, Darcy walked in, hands full of takeout.

The smell of fried rice and sweet-and-sour chicken hit Jane’s nose. She realized it had been… a while… since she last ate. “Thank God,” she muttered.

Darcy grinned. “Nope, just me, though I’m told there’s a resemblance.”

“I don’t see it,” Jane deadpanned, snatching the larger bag and inhaling the smell. It had taken her years to get used to Darcy’s humor, but she’d made progress.

“I knew I shouldn’t have shaved off my beard.” Darcy boosted herself up onto the nearest countertop and pulled out a cardboard box and a pair of chopsticks.

“You got me a fork, right?” Jane asked.

“As if I could forget your absolute lack of chopstick skills,” Darcy said, laughing. “Remember the noodles?”

Jane winced. On a trip to Japan two years ago, she had humiliated herself by slopping noodles down her dress in the middle of a dinner. “I tried to block it out.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a fork in there,” Darcy said, deftly transferring a bite of rice, eggs, and mixed vegetables to her mouth.

Jane dug into the bag. Fried rice, General Tso’s, sweet-and-sour chicken, all her favorites. “I just don’t get why, out of all the utensils they could’ve invented to eat rice, two sticks won out.”

Darcy snorted. “Pfft. Japanese people would say the same thing about forks. And rice-growers in feudal Japan didn’t exactly have a lot of food on the plate, so maybe it was like… utensils that only transport a little bit of food didn’t really matter?”

“You’re guessing,” Jane said, because she knew her friend, even though anthropology was not her area of expertise.

“Totally.” Darcy eyed an unopened can of Red Bull. “I wonder if I can chug that. Been a while since I tried to beat my record…”

“No, we are way past the days of timing your energy drink chugs for entertainment,” Jane said. “And
you pumped up on chemical energy is not particularly pleasant for me.”

“Oh, but I love it,” Darcy said with a wicked grin.

Synapses fired. “That,” Jane said, pointing. “I really don’t get people, or I’d have seen this sooner.”

Darcy blinked. “What?”

“That right there is why Loki likes you,” Jane said.

“Oh, hold on, non sequitur? Where is this coming from?” Darcy made a vague circling motion with her chopsticks.

Jane wiped a piece of far-flung rice off her counter and studied it while she answered. “That face. God of Chaos, right? Lies and Mischief? You fit the chaos part, and the mischief.”

Darcy sucked in a breath, paused, and let it out again without speaking. Jane suspected she’d reflexively summoned some cutting comment that Jane would never think of, like she used to back in college, as a defense, and then held herself back.

“That’s ridiculous,” Darcy said at last. “As if he’d… you know, go for a Midgardian.”

“Thor did,” Jane pointed out, and it barely stung anymore. That he’d left. She didn’t want to date a man who caved to political pressure and walked away from her anyway.

“And it’s still a dumbass idea, which I’m pretty sure I told you back in Middle Of Nowhere, New Mexico,” Darcy retorted. “For one thing, he’s like. A thousand years old. Or something. And for another, in twenty years I’ll be middle aged and he’ll look the same. How is that a good plan?”

“Since when do you do long-term planning?” Jane asked. It was meant as a joke, but the second the words were out of her mouth she realized, and winced.

“I wish I were better with people.”

“You know the last time I tried to get all serious and planny about a relationship,” Darcy said. “Marya. And some clusterfuck on the freeway handed me my heart back in pieces. I don’t really feel like trying again, especially with someone who’d never stick around.”

Jane paused. “Sorry.”

“Shut up and eat your food,” Darcy said, but without heat. She stabbed her chopsticks in Jane’s direction. “I wouldn’t talk about it unless I wanted to. I’m fun like that.” She paused. “Loki’s fun to talk to, okay, I’ll give him that. And hot. But no.”

“Okay,” Jane said. She wanted to talk… to help Darcy with Marya, maybe, or her grief, or something. She’d watched Darcy with the rest of the world for the years. Her friend taught a master class, but no matter how Jane studied, she couldn’t seem to pass the exam. Awkwardness turned to dismissal, inquiries sounded like she hadn’t cared enough to remember things about people in the first place, gestures became strange and foreign. Eventually, she’d stopped trying. Even with Darcy, who knew Jane better than anyone else, she was still at a loss.

Jane did solutions, not feelings, so she offered what she could. “I know a guy I could set you up with.”

“After—what was her name? Laurie? No, thanks,” Darcy said. “She stood me up, remember?”

“Family emergency,” Jane protested.

Jane didn’t want to think Laurie, an acquaintance from college, would’ve done that, but she had to accede to Darcy’s superior awareness of others’ motivations. “Fine, Laurie didn’t work out. But this guy’s really nice.”

“You literally say that about everyone,” Darcy muttered. “Except like Coulson and Fury.”

“Coulson’s okay,” Jane said. “He took my research that one time, but he gave it back, and he was really easy to work with…”

She trailed off when Darcy started laughing and almost inhaled a noodle. “You just proved my point, Janey, you forgive too easily. But whatever. Nice guy, what’s his name?”

Jane opened her mouth to answer, but then her phone rang.

She frowned at it. It was the Stark Industries company line, and it almost never did anything except sit there. Anyone who knew her contacted her via email or one of the online forums used by astrophysicists and other related scientists used to talk to each other, and anyone else was usually handled by PR (Darcy) or JARVIS diverted them for her.

“You better take that,” Darcy said, hopping off the counter. “Gimme your trash, don’t want food smells gumming up your machines.” Jane habitually catalogued the finger-waggle Darcy used to follow up that statement as she handed over the bag of mostly eaten takeout.

Darcy piled their waste in her arms. “Fill me in on Nice Guy later,” she called over her shoulder, and then she was gone.

Jane grabbed the phone. “Dr. Foster, Stark Industries,” she said.

“Jane? It’s Helen. Helen Cho.”

“Helen!” Jane said. She couldn’t decide if she was more surprised or genuinely pleased to hear from her old… huh. She didn’t actually know what to call Helen. So Jane drew from her repository of Darcy-lessons and said, “How are you doing?”

“Your social skills have improved,” Helen said. She’d never been one to mince words, Jane remembered. “I’m all right. How is Stark Industries treating you?”

“Better than being on the road with grants from CERN,” Jane said truthfully. “Since they thought I was a nut case.”

“In all fairness, you are,” Helen said. “But you’re a nut case who’s usually right.”

Jane sighed. This was why she and Helen hadn’t gotten along. Jane never could tell jest from sincerity, and even if she made that basic distinction, jokes could be based in truth, or it could be a sincere thing to say but meant either kindly or maliciously or frankly or… No. too many variables. She chose to take this as a compliment. “Uh. Thanks.”

“Yes, it was a compliment,” Helen said. “We’re all nut cases in one way or another. That’s why we end up in fields like this. Which is why I called you.”

There we go. Darcy would’ve said from the beginning that Helen wanted something. “You need something?” Jane asked. “Grant money? An introduction?”
Helen paused. “Wow, you _have_ gotten better. Look, you’re at _Stark Industries_. Tony Stark, aka _Iron Man_ , employs you. The Avengers live in his tower. I’m working on something that could be very beneficial to them, and to a lot of other people as well, but my funding just got cut.”

Jane pinched the bridge of her nose. Her headache was coming back. Maybe she needed water. Or maybe the stress was finally catching up to her. Most of the people who she actually cared about were currently picking a fight with an international drug cartel. “You want me to get T- Stark to fund you.”

“Yes, and based on the fact that you almost just used his first name, I suspect you can,” Helen fired back.

Jane almost automatically said _yes_ , because scientists did things like this for one another, but then she checked herself. Tony wasn’t just a businessman anymore. If people thought Stark Industries was still making weapons, or… well, she couldn’t actually think of anything else, but she knew Darcy could come up with sixty different reasons that Jane shouldn’t just introduce anyone to Tony. Screening process, she’d call it.

But she didn’t want to just stonewall Helen, either. “How about… you can find me on _Formulae_, right?” Jane asked, naming the main online forum that researchers used to find peer edits, partners, or advice.

“Yes.”

“Send me what you can,” Jane said. “I’ll see what I can do.” There. Darcy could help her deal with this now, with the political or societal ramifications. Jane hadn’t promised anything, and hadn’t asked anything unreasonable either.

Helen paused. “I appreciate the caution,” she said. “Deal. I won’t send over anything _too_ sensitive— wouldn’t want someone stealing my work—” _joke or warning?_ Jane thought wildly— “and you can check it out.”

“Thanks,” Jane said. “It’s… good to hear from you, Helen.”

“You as well,” Helen said.

The line went dead.

Jane sighed. Every time she thought she had things managed, someone threw a new complication into the equation and she had to balance all the variables _again_. She and Helen had a complicated history involving competition for multiple science awards in their undergrad years, a very public shouting match, two accusations of plagiarism (both against them by other peers), and four highly successful co-designed and co-led research projects. Not to mention, Jane had a sneaking suspicion that putting Helen and Darcy in the same room would be comparable to releasing two highly combustible gases near one another and hoping no one lit a match.

But in the end, what mattered was whether her research was valuable, whether it deserved funding. So Jane set her personal issues with Helen aside and resolved to simply let Darcy and Tony handle this when it arrived. She would work with Helen if that’s what it came to. In one way, at least, she and Helen were alike: they put their work before everything else.

_I can’t sit here and do nothing_, Jane realized.

She didn’t want to get into anything too complicated or delicate. She had three sets of data waiting to be crunched, but that kind of calculation she did half in her head, and if she was interrupted she
sometimes had to start over. The last three attempts to generate Loki’s Higgs-Boson anomalies without him present had failed, and she couldn’t think of anything else to try until she got him back on the table, and there was no way she’d try to cause quantum tunneling without a hell of a lot more controlled variables than she had now.

Loki… Loki’s blood work.

Jane frowned. It was really Bruce’s area of expertise, but she knew she could probably at least understand the core concepts, and it would at least be a distraction.

“JARVIS, can you get me the blood work results for Thor and Loki?” Jane asked.

“One moment, Dr. Foster.” A faint hum came from the ceiling, where the network cables were laid, and then Jane’s main screen chimed. “The data transfer is complete.”

“Thanks,” Jane said, and kicked her swivel chair over to the screen.

The files were almost identical. She shoved away a pang when she saw Thor Odinson written across the top of one data sheet, focusing on the columns of numbers and analyses both mechanical and human-generated.

It was challenging and interesting, to immerse herself in something she didn’t totally understand, something from another field. Jane liked biology well enough, so she caught on quickly, and started going through everything. Bruce seemed to have concluded nothing particularly new from Loki’s results beyond corroboration of Thor’s, an addition to the database they were beginning to create of extraterrestrial–offrealm–life.

But Bruce was thinking in terms of genes and heredity, chemical balances, not…

Jane narrowed her eyes. Something was wrong here.

She was used to analyzing data scattered across graphs and noticing the correlations, the patterns, even if the causations and formulae evaded her. Genetics was no different; probabilities and possibilities and mathematical impossibilities came together to create a set of atoms and molecules arranged in just the right sequence to provide information on how to build a body. She had no reason to assume that Aesir genetics worked very differently, based on this and on her experiences with Thor, so it made sense that his data seemed to follow a cohesive pattern.

Loki’s, though. Something was off about it.

“JARVIS,” Jane said at last, sitting back. “Please run a correlation scan on the basic genetic information of Thor versus Loki.”

“We do not know enough, at present, to truly compare their genes,” JARVIS said. “Elements of Aesir blood remain beyond my ability to quantify. However, I can perform an analysis of the information we have managed to acquire.”

“Good,” Jane said, thinking. “Focus on… the math. Formulas, ratios, sequences, that sort of thing.” She frowned at the screen. “I can’t quite put my finger on what’s bugging me here, but you’ve got extra processing power.”

“It might take some days,” JARVIS warned. “There is a vast amount of data generated by blood work performed for both Thor and Loki.”

“That’s fine,” Jane said. “And, uh. Don’t tell Loki this is going on.” She hesitated. “Or Bruce.”
“My protocols direct me to inform Mr. Stark upon his return to the Tower,” JARVIS said. “Given that he agrees with this decision, I will do as you request.”

“Thanks,” Jane said, and went back to staring at the screen.

She could be wrong. She almost hoped she was, because if she was right… Actually, Jane didn’t know what it would mean if she was right. Nothing good, probably.

Not that it would matter if Bruce or Tony or even Loki was injured or killed in this fight…

“Shit,” Jane said to the empty lab. She was right back to worrying.

After another few minutes, Jane sat forward and swiped the blood work files out of the way, opened an Internet browser, and navigated to Formulae. If she couldn’t concentrate on her own work, at least she could use this time to catch up on what her peers were discussing.
November 2011

Steve caught a glimpse of his own reflection in a window and flinched.

He felt the same. His point of view hadn’t changed to that of a shorter man. His arms were the same length when he reached for things. His stride was the same length. But when he looked at his reflection, he met its eyes squarely and saw a Hispanic man looking back, one who was a lot shorter than six foot two. And he wasn’t looking down at the reflection, either. It was a paradox, and Steve’s brain hurt almost immediately trying to resolve the two conflicting images.

He looked away. Now was not the time to process Loki’s insane voodoo magic.

They’d entered through a small side door and gone almost unnoticed in all the chaos. Bucky, Natasha, and Maria seemed to be causing a disproportionate amount of chaos. Periodic explosions or the roar of Tony passing overhead marked Steve’s only way of keeping track of the battle, with comms down; he and Clint and Loki (who also looked like cartel people, which unnerved him every time he looked at them) hadn’t seen anyone in about two minutes.

None of the rooms they passed was well furnished; the whole place seemed cobbled together and poorly funded. Apparently the cartel people didn’t pay their storage warehouses much.

“Anything?” Clint asked as Steve locked yet another door behind himself.

He shook his head. “Nope.”

“Keep going, then,” Clint said.

“Could the intelligence that led us to this place have been incorrect?” Loki asked softly, following in their footsteps. Steve wished the guy didn’t always talk like he swallowed a Charles Dickens novel.

“Unlikely, it’s Tony’s intel,” Clint called back from farther up the hall. “But I guess that’s poss… hold up. Steve. Stairs up here.”

Steve’s head snapped up. “There’s not a second floor in this part of the building.”

“Going down,” Clint said, shining his flashlight down into the stairwell.

Steve swapped a glance with Loki and they broke into a jog.

The stairs went farther down than Steve’ would’ve expected, but not too far for Clint’s flashlight beam. At the bottom was a red door marked by four padlocks.

Clint’s eyebrows were raised almost to his hairline. “Anybody wanna bet that’s not where we’re headed?”

“I do not believe those would be favorable odds,” Loki mused with a faint smile.

“Did you just make a joke?” Clint asked.

Loki arched a brow. “Will you ever know?”
Steve shook his head, smiling, and started down the stairs.

At the bottom, he examined the padlocks. Rusted.

“Hawkeye. Can you pick these?” he asked, in case anyone was listening to them over their comms.

Clint knelt and examined the bottom lock. “I mean, probably, but it’s going to be a minute,” he said. “Shoot them off?”

“Loud, but if that’s the only option—” Steve drew a pistol from his belt.

“Move aside,” Loki said impatiently, and reached out a hand to the door.

Clint scrambled aside instantly, and Steve shifted so Loki had a clear line of sight. The Asgardian began to murmur quiet words beneath his breath. Seconds later, the locks shifted and clicked open with barely a sound.

“Damn, why didn’t we get one of you beforehand?” Clint said. “Hmmm. How about Lockpick?”

“Far too plebeian,” Loki said haughtily. “Not to mention limited.”

“Okay, okay, jezz,” Clint muttered. He and Loki cleared the locks and chains off the door while Steve crept back to the top of the stairs and kept watch.

“Yo, boss man,” Clint called softly. “We’re through.”

Steve jogged back down to them. “Let’s see it.”

Loki hauled the door open.

Lights flickered on automatically. Steve and Clint immediately dropped to the sides of the doorframe, but no bullets or shouts came from the other side of the door. Loki ignored them and walked through, still in the guise of the cartel guy whose face he’d borrowed.

“Not like people shooting at him even matters to him,” Clint muttered.

“Jealous?” Steve said with a grin.

“Course not,” Clint scoffed, standing up.

Steve shot him a look.

“Okay, maybe a little,” Clint said, and they followed Loki through.

Steve’s mouth dropped open.

“Shit,” Clint muttered.

“Accurate assessment,” Loki said.

The room was a basement, but it stretched out under what looked like probably the entire complex of buildings, and it was stacked floor to ceiling with plastic-wrapped cubes of compressed green powder.

Loki stepped up to the nearest stack of packages, each of which was as tall as he. A knife appeared in his hand and he sliced open the plastic sheeting.
Clint stepped back. “Whoa, man, I don’t want to breathe any of that in.”

“I will contain it,” Loki said absently. Some of the powder trickled out through the hole and he caught it in his hand. Freed from the packaging, it was iridescent and almost greasy beneath the cheap fluorescent lighting. Steve kept his distance, like Clint, while Loki rubbed a bit of the powder between his fingers.

“As I suspected,” he said at last. “An adaptation of a compound extracted from a plant that grown only on Vanaheim. The extract is but one of the ingredients; the others appear to be of Midgard, but that extract is the predominant addictive force of the drug.” He twisted his hand, and the powder flowed back up into the hole in the plastic, which sealed itself back over. “It is a clever composition, to be sure.”

“Clever?” Steve asked. That set off some alarm bells. “You’re not thinking of duplicating it, are you?”

“Certainly not,” Loki said. “I find myself respecting Hydra for this, though it is not a death I would wish on any innocent.”

_Innocent_. Steve’s discomfort grew. He didn’t know how Loki defined “innocent.”

“What about on Thanos?” Clint asked.

Loki’s smile reminded Steve that in every other mammal species he knew of, baring teeth was a threat, not an expression of pleasure. “For Thanos, this death would be far too pleasant.”

“Can’t disagree with you there,” Clint muttered, wandering farther into the stacks. “Damn, they’ve got to have a couple million dollars of product in here at least…”

Steve was watching Loki. “And what if Thanos offered you rule of this realm?” he said. “Or of Asgard, in exchange for your help?”

Loki turned and fixed his eyes on Steve. He remembered what Natasha had said: *spiderwebs holding an eagle_. “Had he come to me and offered me an alliance in exchange for his aid in conquering Asgard, I may have considered it,” Loki said evenly. “Instead he came as an enemy and broke my mind to his will. I will never form an alliance with him.”

“You expect me to believe you’ll help us protect Earth just because Thanos is the attacker?” Steve asked, letting his skepticism show.

“Yes.” Loki didn’t waver.

“Guys, now is maybe not the time for this,” Clint said, sticking his head back into the open space by the entrance. “We’ve got to decide what to do with all this. It’s way beyond what we planned on having to move. Even Plan E can’t handle this much product.”

“Plan E…” Loki mused. “Is there a Plan F?”

“Technically,” Steve admitted.

Clint’s head snapped over to him. “And you didn’t tell us?”

“Ironside and I made it as a last resort,” Steve admitted. “It involves blowing up the entire facility to vaporize all the drugs. Someone mentioned it when we were meeting with the UN to plan this and everyone shot it down, so we kept it a secret.”
“So we’re going behind the UN’s back?” Clint said. “That’s. Pretty ballsy.”

“We’ll say we accidentally hit a munitions store,” Steve said. “Tony’s already found the one here and figured out how to make it look like that to forensics. It might be the only option. And we can’t risk this ending up in anyone else’s hands. I don’t trust the government with the chemical makeup of this.”

“We should probably head out then, yeah?” Clint said. “If it’s all gonna blow soon.”

Steve looked around. “Not much else we can do here. Unless we vanish all of it.” He looked at Loki. “Could you do that?”

Loki considered the rows and rows of packages on pallets stretching back into the shadowed recesses of the basement. “Possibly,” he said. “However, one of the more interesting properties of this compound is that it is extremely resistant to seidr. Another related natural compound from Vanaheim can be processed in a way that creates a drug that can temporarily eliminate a mage’s power. There is no certainty that this could all be vanished, or that it would go where I sent it. I assume you do not wish for samples of this drug to be scattered over Midgard?”

“Definitely not,” Steve said. “Guess we’re going with Plan F. Let’s get out of here.”

The three of them left the room full of product, pausing only long enough to re-lock the door while Loki added a working he said would hold it against any conventional Midgardian weapon, save for someone breaking through the wall to get to the product. No one would be able to get any of it off the facility. They then took off up the stairs and paused only long enough to clear the hallway before they booked it out of the room.

Steve’s earpiece crackled with Natasha’s voice. “–help–repulsor weapons–Shadow down–”

Clint’s eyes widened a fraction. “Boss, you getting this?”

“Yes,” Steve said grimly. “Let’s go.”

They picked up the pace.

“Ironside, if you copy, take out that jammer!” Steve snapped.

No response.

They had to get outside.

“Steve, down!” Clint yelled, and the next thing Steve knew he was being tackled. Two impacts shuddered through his body in midair and then they were slamming into the ground and rolling one over the other.

Steve groaned and sat up. Loki stood over him, a shimmering shield stopping bullets midair. He reached out and clenched both fists. The two guys shooting at them from up ahead both fell with necks at awkward angles.

Moisture crept through the fabric of Steve’s uniform.

He twisted and frantically patted himself down. No injuries, no pain. So where…

He turned and saw Clint.

Shit.
“Magician!” Steve snapped. “J–Scientist said you could teleport. Can you get him out of here?”

“Interdimensional travel is hard on nonmages,” Loki said tightly, kneeling on Clint’s other side. He rested his hands on Clint’s torso, in between the bullet holes. Clint was already unconscious. Critical condition. Probably shock. Steve realized Clint had quite possibly saved his life.

“How?” he asked.

Loki shook his head. “Not properly, not other people. I can keep him stable, but he will require professional medical attention if he is to truly recover.”

“Get him to the UN troops,” Steve snapped. “They’re five miles west of here. Do not drop your disguise.”

“Yes, Father,” Loki said drily, and closed his eyes. “I require two minutes to stabilize his condition before he can be moved.”

“You have one. This whole place is about to blow,” Steve said. “And if you can, I need you to scan or something to make sure none of that product survives the explosion.”

“I will do what I can. Go implement your Plan F.” Loki shot Steve a firm glare. “Your illusory protection will fall away as soon as you leave me.”

“Fine. Don’t let him die,” Steve ordered, and took off at a run.

Careless fool, he raged at himself. Should’ve watched where you were going—if he dies it’s your fault—

But those thoughts could wait until later; they’d be useless in a battle. Steve shook them off and kept running.

He burst out the same door they’d entered through earlier, and froze.

Natasha, Hill, and Bucky were on the ground in the center of the courtyard, laid out on the ground.

Roaring filled Steve’s ears. They couldn’t be dead. Not Bucky. Not Natasha.

Then he registered the weapons in the hands of half the people out there: energy weapons. Glowing blue. Hydra tech.

Those things killed by vaporization. Steve remembered that all too clearly. He hoped to God that meant his friends were only unconscious.

This was still a serious problem. Even alone, he could’ve salvaged this if they had normal weapons. But he couldn’t fight those alone.

A gout of flame erupted from the south.

Steve hit the dirt. Debris scattered across the courtyard. A piece of flaming material hit the dirt not five feet from Bucky and he resisted the urge to bolt out there and cover his friends’ bodies with his own.

“–got the comms back!” Tony shouted. “Guys, do you read?”

“Kinda tied up out here,” Sam said breathlessly. “Group of ‘em in a truck running southwest.”
“You good?” Tony asked.

“Yeah. Help the others.”

“JARVIS, get me some data,” Tony ordered.

“I could use some help,” Steve said softly. He ducked back into the building. “Widow, Shadow, and Winter are down. They’ve got Hydra energy weapons, Ironside, be caref.”

“Fuck,” Tony hissed.

“What?”


“Clint’s critical, Loki’s getting him to the UN. He’ll call their troops in,” Steve said.

“Too slow.”

Bruce chimed in. “Guys, I could–”

“No,” Steve said. “I can handle this.” He had to.

“Boss-”

“Stay in the jet, Gamma,” Steve snapped. “That’s an order.”

He cut off his comm and stepped out into the courtyard again.

It was chaos. He saw at a glance that half of them were bolting in disorganized fashion for the gates. Tony, outside, was going down in a controlled but very obvious blaze of red and gold and fire. Not for the first time, Steve wished Tony’s ego would allow for a suit painted in less obvious colors. The other half the guards were arguing, shouting. An opportunity.

Steve drew a gun, raised his shield, and took off into the courtyard.
Chapter 105

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Classified Location], Sinaloa Warehouse, Mexico

November 2011

Bruce paced.

It was the only coping mechanism he had that would even kind of work right now. Stress, worry, fear, and anger were all bubbling right beneath the surface of his careful calm. Technically, the anger was always there, but the addition of the others emotions, the danger his teammates were in—it was a dangerous combination.

He didn’t want the other guy to show up and make a mess of things.

He didn’t even know if he could control it again. Practicing was too dangerous. The only time in his life he’d ever had conscious control as the other guy was in New York, and he’d done a hell of a lot of damage even then. And he still didn’t remember everything. The other guy was a separate identity. And the UN was right there.

Bruce was afraid.

The world had already seen the monster, but a controlled monster. He didn’t want them to see it slip its leash.

A grunt came through the comms.

“Code Green!” Tony shouted.

“What?” Bruce asked, startled, spinning toward the cockpit.

The screens showed him a worsened situation: Tony, grounded in the desert by Hydra energy weapons, desperately fending off a pack of guards. Sam in the southwest, holding his own but still tied up. Natasha and Barnes and Maria unconscious or dead in the courtyard. And Steve, fighting but about to lose. Surrounded. Bruce could see what Steve couldn’t.

“Code Green! Code-”

A shot clipped Tony’s helmet. He spun and almost fell, got up and kept fighting, but no more sound came from him. His communications array was down.

Bruce’s heart was thrumming. He felt wired. Almost drunk, but instead of foggy his mind was clearer than before. Slipping into a simpler thought process:

Those were his friends.

They were in danger.

The UN troops were too far out to get here in time.

Someone needed to get Steve, Natasha, Barnes, and Maria out of that compound so JARVIS could
“JARVIS,” Bruce said, and his voice came out an octave deeper than usual. “You can target the munitions store? If I get them out?”

“Dr. Banner, am I correct in assuming that you intend to transform?” JARVIS asked.

Bruce took a breath. His eyes, when he glanced at his reflection, were bright radioactive green.

“Yes.”

“I can implement Plan F independently of Mr. Stark’s command, yes,” JARVIS said. “I will offer you two minutes.”

“Okay.” Bruce took a deeper breath. Braced himself. “Open the bay door, please. Keep the plane at a hover, don’t let it get blown up, and help Tony as soon as you’ve taken care of the warehouse.”

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS said.

The rear bay door opened.

Bruce sucked in and held his last breath, and jumped out of the plane.

…

…

He landed with a roar.

Little-people-enemies scurried around his ankles.

He bellowed at them and backhanded two of them away. The others screamed. Fired. Their energy-bullet-weapons tickled. He raged around the courtyard. They fell easily. So did their hide-storage-sleeping-buildings. He smashed those, too, if they were in his way. Sometimes even if they weren’t. The buildings belonged to the little-people-enemies.

Harder strikes hit his shoulders. Back. Powerful enough to hurt. He spun around and snarled. Smelled their fear. Ran into the haze of bullets-energy-fire with a hand over his eyes. Broke their ranks.

The fear-smell was stronger now. That pleased him. They started running, shooting over their shoulders. Part of him howled for blood, for the chase and the kill. But he had a goal: protect protect protect running through his head. The people there, in the courtyard. Three of them. And a fourth, struggling to his feet amidst a circle of other little people in the corner. Soon this place would be ash-fire-explosion. He would survive it but the little-people-allies-friends would not. Get them out get them out.

He collected the people on the ground into his arms. They were floppy and limp. It was hard to remember their fragile bones, to not crush them in his grip or damage them against each other. They tangled together. Heads–necks–those were easily breakable. He made sure their break-bone-heads were all tucked in his left elbow, against his chest. Held still.

The fourth collected a circle of metal off the ground and staggered forward. He strode to meet the little man in red-and-blue. Boss. Steve.

Friend-Steve climbed onto his back.
“Hold on,” he grunted, and started to run.

Each stride jostled the people in his arms. Steve-on-his-back flopped. He had a hard time staying on. He slowed down a little, tried to stretch out each stride and be smoother. It seemed to help. But he didn’t slow down too much. He wasn’t sure how far away the little people had to get to survive. So he’d get them as far as he could.

There. Off to the right. Another little person, this one in a carapace of red and gold. Friend-person. Tony. He veered that way. This one, he thought, could fly in his armor, but he was grounded now. The armor was scratched and battered.

He slammed into the little-people-enemies shooting at ally-friend-Tony. They fell before they could turn their weapons on him. The dangerous weapons, bulky and glowing blue-white with power.

“Uh. Bruce? Buddy?” Tony said.

He grabbed Tony in his right hand. Not very gently. The metal-armor-skin could protect the little man’s weak skeleton and there was no time to be careful. Holding the bodies of his allies-teammates-friends, he bolted into the desert.

Steve-friend’s grip began to weaken.

He ducked his body forward to flatten his back a little. Maybe that would help the little man stay aboard. Just a few seconds longe–

Explosion. Large. It hurled him forward. Steve’s grip slid off. He curled himself around the four people in his arms and hands, tucked them into his body-that-would-not-break and turned so his back hit the sand and slid.

They came to a stop. He was unhurt as he knew he would be. He dropped his burden on the ground and roared triumph at the sky. Behind them, fires burned. The buildings were gone. So was the addiction-offrealm-drug-evil they’d come to kill. That was good. That pleased him.

He heard the rumble of vehicles. He spun. Glared into the desert, across the sands. This would be a good place to run, if he were alone. Open, flat, uninterrupted for miles.

The vehicle-war-machines were on the horizon. Motoring for the burning-bad-place. He growled at them. He remembered this. Ross-general-enemy had sent them against him before. There were the sound-dish-weapons that had immobilized him before. Not aimed at him, but in the convoy.

He would break the sound-dish-weapons before they could be used on him.

“Bruce,” someone said behind him.

He turned back. Bruce. That was the name his little-person-shape used. He knew he could let this go. Shrink back to little-person-weak-bones-Bruce.

“Jet,” the woman said. Assassin-spy-red-hair-Natasha-friend. “Get on the jet. They won’t touch you.”

He growled. Looked back at the sound-dish-weapons and the vehicle-war-machines that carried them, accompanied them. If he stayed he would have to break them. Or he could bring little-man-scientist-Bruce back.

“They won’t touch you,” Natasha-friend said, struggling to her feet. She was weak. But alive.
Bright-hair-breathing-beating-heart-alive. He’d done that. Saved his allies-teammates-friends. They had trusted him. So he would trust them.

He snorted. Slowed his movements.

“Bruce,” Tony-friend said slowly. Raggedly. He pulled off his face-plate-protection. “Come on, buddy, let’s not start a war with the UN right now.”

War. Yes. Battle-fighting-war. It would be fun. But problematic for his allies-teammates-friends, for little-person-Bruce.

He snorted and closed his eyes.

…

Bruce blinked.

He was on the sand, outside the compound. Fractured memories slipped through his head, of fighting and carrying people and explosions rattling the world. He rolled over and sat up.

“Hey,” Natasha said with a grin. She looked—in pain. “Nice to have you back, Doctor.”

“Did I… hurt anyone?” he asked.

Tony clung a metal arm around Bruce’s shoulders and helped him stand. “Nope. Well, the cartel guys, but trust me, I won’t hold it against you. The other guy saved our asses.”

Thank God. Bruce breathed out a shaky exhalation and closed his eyes.

The roar of the jet descending kicked sand up. He squinted at it. “JARVIS?”

“Landing to pick us up,” Tony said. He looked away. “Ugh, the UN finally got their asses in motion. Clint’s critical but hopefully L—uh, our other scary friend got him medical care soon enough.” Tony’s tone was flippant, but Bruce knew him well enough to detect the worry underneath.

“You have to deal with them,” Bruce said. “Right?”

“Yeah.” Tony looked closer at him. “You get on the jet, though, you look exhausted.”

“I am exhausted,” Bruce said. He always was after a… after the other guy left. “And hungry.”

“We’ve got protein bars on the plane,” Barnes said. “I also need to get out of sight.”

“All three of you, on board,” Tony said. “Maria?”

“Here.” She’d been on board the plane but stepped out again, face cleaned of blood and dirt. “I was cleaning up. You and I can handle the UN, Stark. What’s the story?”

“Accidentally hit a munitions store,” Tony said. “I took care of it for the forensic teams. Where’s Steve?”

Bruce frowned. “I, uh… Oh. He was… I think riding piggyback when I left the compound. And fell off when the explosion happened.”
They paused and looked around the desert.

“Shit.” Tony muttered. “Maria, I’ve got spare thrusters in the jet, I can grab them and search if–”

“There!” Barnes interrupted, pointing over at a dune.

Sure enough, Steve was walking slowly and painfully toward them.

“I’ll get him,” Barnes said, and took off at a jog.

Maria shut her eyes for a second. “Natasha, Bruce, get on the jet and go pick them up, then go help Sam. Tony and I will deal with the UN. It could be a few hours before we get this cleared up. And someone contact the medical team, get me news on Clint. Also Loki.”

The UN vehicles were only a mile away now.

“Roger that,” Natasha said efficiently, and took Bruce’s weight from Tony. She helped him up the ramp into the jet. He found a spot in the left-side niche, where there was a comfortable seat and a cabinet full of water bottles and Cliff bars, while she settled into the cockpit.

The jet lifted off the ground, slowly.

Bruce leaned his head back and closed his eyes, chewing a huge mouthful of Cliff bar. The energy-dense food would help him recover. Right now, his entire body ached, his stomach growled, his throat was parched, and he really needed sleep.

He found a screen and asked JARVIS to cue up a violin concerto, one of Bruce’s favorite pieces. It would calm his mind and help him sleep after an incident; he’d learned that years before. He let the melody fill his head and chase away all of his thoughts while he chugged three bottles of water and ate another four Cliff bars.

The bench was too narrow, so Bruce wrapped himself in a space blanket and curled up in the fetal position on the floor. Music drifted around his ears, and he fell headlong into a deep sleep.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was really not easy to write. I guess, in the films, Marvel's never clarified (enough to satisfy me, at least) exactly what the relationship between Bruce Banner and the Hulk is. For the purposes of this fic, I see it as Hulk being a separate consciousness who can't exist at the same time as Bruce; the Hulk is a reaction to environmental threats. He reacts to Bruce's emotions and thoughts, though: if Bruce trusts you, so will the Hulk; if Bruce is afraid of you, the Hulk will destroy you; if Bruce hates you, the Hulk will also destroy you. That sort of thing. The short sentence structure and the Hulk's unusual way of processing descriptions wasn't meant to convey that he's unintelligent--to the contrary, I think the Hulk is smarter than a lot of people give him credit for; he *does* come from Bruce Banner, after all--but just that he thinks and processes things very differently from Bruce or other humans.

I guess what I'm trying to say is, writing from the Hulk's perspective was challenging and interesting, and I'd love to hear what you think about how I handled it!
Above Mexico City

November 2011

Tony pulled off his headset and stepped down from the cockpit. “Good news or bad news first?” he asked.

His teammates were sprawled around the jet in various stages of post-battle exhaustion. Natasha and Bucky, as Tony had taken to calling him, were the most functional; Steve was still one massive bruise from getting thrown across the desert without even a Hulk-cushion. Bruce was still bleary-eyed from four hours of power napping, but Tony decided he’d want the update.

“Bad news,” Natasha said.

“Clint’s in critical condition. Punctured lung, three fractured ribs, and they had to give him a blood transfusion. Sam’s also in the hospital with a concussion, not too bad but also not superficial, and a few scrapes and sprains that aren’t serious.”

Bucky blew out a breath. “Could be worse.”

“What’s the good news?” Bruce asked.

“Good news is the munitions story is holding up,” Tony said. “According to Maria.”

“Remind me why we’re doing that?” Bruce asked. “Couldn’t we just tell them we wanted the drugs gone?”

Tony shared a glance with Steve. “Ross came to me after a meeting and said he wanted us to get him samples,” Steve said flatly. “I think he thought going to the military man would help his case. I don’t trust him with that information but Tony convinced me we should at least not make it obvious that we kept it from him.”

“And you didn’t tell us.” Natasha was unreadable.

“Nope,” Tony said.

Steve rose to his feet. “We hoped it wouldn’t come to this. We didn’t want to even open the door to a path of going against the UN unless we had to. A small quantity of the drugs we could’ve gotten out and hidden or destroyed like we planned. This drastic action, though–it was a last resort.”

“Mmm.” Natasha didn’t show any visible reaction, just looked down at her hands again.

“Maria?” Bucky asked.

Tony tapped the headset. “In the hospital. She’s finished dealing with the UN for now–she had to give statements and other bureaucratic time-wasters–and in the hospital. Clint and Sam are being transferred back to New York Presbyterian within the next few hours; Maria’ll fly with them.”

“Loki?” Steve asked.

Tony pointed at a screen on the rear wall of the jet. “There.”
Steve looked. Tony knew he’d see the tracker dot of the wrist cuff blinking a few miles southwest at
the United Nations combined forces’ temporary camp, under the command of a Mexican general.
“Maria had to go bust him out of UN custody before he had to lie his ass off about who he was. We
need to create a fake identity for him stat—JARVIS, remind me to do that when we get back to New
York. For now he’s waiting by the base; he’ll rejoin us when we stop to refuel. Which is where
we’re going now.”

Bucky sat back against the wall. “So we have another few hours in here.”

“Unfortunately,” Tony said. “If you need target practice, try and wait till we’re back.”

His tone had a bite to it. Bucky’s studied lack of reaction was a reaction in itself. Tony turned away
and slid into the captain’s seat. “JARVIS, get me a flight plan,” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh,” Tony called over his shoulder, “and all the Sinaloa guys who survived are being arrested.
Drugs and human trafficking. We found records of their plans to run the product across the border
and that truck that Sam went after had a couple missing persons in it, mostly women and girls. Just so
you know. We did good, guys.”
En Route to Avengers Tower

November 2011

“It’s not your fault.”

Steve looked up and saw Natasha standing there, face unreadable.

He breathed out and looked down. “Yeah it is.”

“No,” she said, more firmly, sitting down next to him. “It’s really not. Steve, seriously, we’re big boys and girls. We make our own choices. Clint walked in there with you because he trusts you, and because he believes in this mission. He walked in there knowing exactly what would happen, and he took those shots for you for his own reasons.”

“I just…” Steve closed his eyes. He didn’t have words to explain why he was so furious with himself. He knew Clint made his own decisions, and so did Sam, but in the end he’d been the one to lead them in there. In the end, he was sitting there while his friends were in the hospital. “I can’t screw up.”

“You didn’t.”

He looked up. Bucky stood there.

“I know what it was like for you,” Bucky said quietly, kneeling in front of Steve. “Being Captain America.” He tapped his head with a small smile. “I’ve been remembering. Slowly. You were the poster boy, you had everyone’s hopes on your shoulders, you couldn’t slip up. I was the one who did your dirty work, remember? So we didn’t have to sully the icon.” He snorted. “Knife in the dark. There’s some irony. But whatever. The point is, you don’t have to be perfect all the time. It’s okay to screw up. It’s okay to let us take some of the slack. We got overconfident, didn’t do proper recon, missed their energy weapons. We shouldn’t have been down in that courtyard in the first place. You distracting them probably saved our lives.”

Steve bit his lip.

“Let us share the load,” Tony added, leaning on the wall nearby.

Steve looked up at him. His relationship with Tony was complicated, to say the least, but here he was trying to help.

Tony joined their little clump. “Sam’s been… helping me,” he said slowly, unable to meet any of their eyes. “Talking about—there’s a form of PTSD that involves blaming yourself, all the time. I get it. I feel like that all the damn time. Like you have to do everything yourself, and every time something goes wrong, you think you should’ve fixed it, if only you’d been faster, smarter, stronger.” He finally met Steve’s eyes. “Am I right?”

Steve swallowed. “I—yeah.”

“Of course I am,” Tony said. “It’s irrational, it’s annoying, but there you go.” He stood up. “Someone at the UN is pitching a hissy fit. I’ll go put out our fires. Take a break, Rogers.”
Bucky watched him walk away, brows furrowed. “When did he get nice?” he asked.

Natasha snorted. “Not sure I’d call that nice.”

“Nice for a Stark,” Bucky corrected.

Steve found himself grinning a little. “He cares. He’s terrible at showing it, but he cares.” He took a breath. “Thanks. Both of you.”

“No problem,” Bucky said, smiling back. “I’m with you to the end of the line.”

Steve felt like someone had just set off a firework in his heart.

“Oh, get a room,” Natasha teased.

“No,” Bucky said, mock horrified. “I’d never betray you, my dearest—”

“Too late,” Natasha said, resting a hand over her heart. “You have wounded me beyond redemption—”

“What, is this Shakespeare in the park now?” Bruce asked, sticking his head into the niche where they all sat. “Because I’ve been told I play Horatio really well.”
Chapter 108

Avengers Tower

November 2011

“Miss Lewis, I know the Lance project has been attacked in the media, but I can assure you that my department has no intentions of manufacturing illegal weapons.”

“I believe you, Dr. Fisher,” Darcy said. “Problem is, the media doesn’t. So here’s what we’re gonna do. You have a press conference tomorrow.” She slid a folder across the table. “Study this. It’s your story. Don’t say anything more or less. If you get flustered, just stick to the script or say ‘I cannot speak to that at this time’ or something like that. Act like it’s no big deal.”

The sweaty man in the chair opposite her sat up straighter, almost offended. “Miss Lewis, it is not part of the academic’s job to concern himself with such things as press conferences,” he said. “I was under the impression that that’s what Mr. Stark pays you for.”

“Listen, Dr. Fi–Can I call you Don?”

“I’d rather that you didn’t,” he said stiffly.

Darcy beamed. “Great. So, Don, the problem is that everyone expects us to make this a big deal. Stark Industries doesn’t make weapons anymore. The Lance project isn’t making weapons. Someone wants people to think it’s making weapons to undermine this company’s credibility.” She didn’t let a hint of condescension creep into her voice–more than could be said for this dumbass–and let him stew over whether she was talking down to him or not. “If I got out there and did a press conference, it would send a message that this is a big deal. It’s not, so you’re going to get out on that stage, downplay it, follow the script I made you, and leave. Simple. Then you’re going to quietly discontinue the Lance project.”

“W-what?” he sputtered. “You can’t just–not your department–”

“Yes, it is,” Darcy said. “This is what Mr. Stark pays me for, Don. Your program’s become a liability. It will be quietly discontinued and your research work stored. In a few months, it will be quietly restarted with a different name, because Mr. Stark thinks you’ve had some interesting progress. We’ll overhaul the staff, of course, because the current Lance information shouldn’t have hit the media anyway, which smacks of corporate espionage.” She glanced down at the information on her desktop. “I’m told you prefer research work in physiological engineering. There are limited spots in that particular department at the moment, however, so you’ll be notified of your updated employment status after the press conference.” The threat was implied: if he didn’t handle the press well, he’d have a choice of quitting or working whatever crappy clerical job Darcy could have her people find for him. “I think this sounds like an excellent plan, don’t you?”

Sweaty Donald wasn’t haughty now. In fact, he was squirming. “Yes, Miss Lewis, I–believe I do,” he said.

“Awesome.” Darcy shot him her sweetest smile. “Thanks so much for your cooperation, Don. Don’t forget your script!”
He took the folder, gave her a look that was half glare and half fear, and left the room.

This was Darcy’s technical job, the one on her tax forms and shit: head of Stark’s PR department. The last guy had left under serious pressure from alleged insider trading; even though he’d never been charged, the rumors got him kicked out unanimously by the SI board of directors. She smirked a little at the memory and spun around in his desk chair. It was a great chair, something straight out of a Poliform catalogue. Upside of working for Stark Industries. Also the hazard pay when she ended up in the middle of a death twister like that one time in Peru.

“Miss Lewis?”

Darcy looked up. “Yeah, James, what’s up?”

“I have someone to see you,” James said.

Darcy squinted at him. His eyes were curiously wide. “I thought I told you guys not to bring me people without calling up first,” she said.

“Yeah, but he’s got something very important to tell you,” James said eagerly.

“Huh.” Darcy tapped her fingers. James never did anything eagerly, and definitely not things that involved other people, which was why she had him down on floor seventeen instead of up here in her actual territory. “Okay, where is–”

James’ guest stepped around the corner.

Darcy came within an inch of facepalming. She knew that face. “James,” she said, “did my guest tell you what he’s here for?”

“It’s very important,” James repeated.

“Yes,” Darcy muttered, “I’m sure. Thanks, James, and close the door on your way out, mmkay?”

“Okay,” James said, smiled at her visitor, and left.

Darcy hit a button. The glass walls of her office darkened until no one would be able to see in. “The hell are you doing here?”

Loki smiled. The expression was weirdly soft and kind on this face; she’d seen him wear it a few times before, when she dragged him out of the building for his ongoing education in Earth food. “Visiting a friend, of course.”

“I like your real face better,” Darcy told him. “This one doesn’t suit you. And I thought you were supposed to inform us when you do magic.”

“I did inform you,” Loki said pleasantly. “Just now.”

“You know that’s not at all what that restriction meant,” Darcy said, “but whatever. James isn’t going to wake up speaking gibberish or convinced he’s a merman, right?”

“Of course not,” Loki said. “Though he may have a headache for a few hours.”

“How kind. Why are you here?”

Loki shrugged and settled into a chair—not the one in front of her desk, which probably still had marks on it from Sweaty Don, but a spare seat in the corner. “Can I not have simply been in search
“Unlikely. You want something.”

“Perhaps it is only to watch you work,” Loki said with a smile. “I was very impressed with the way you handled that scientist.”

“Sweaty Donald,” Darcy said, nodding. “Been dealing with this Lance project mess for two months. And how did you listen in on that? This office is soundproofed and packed with jamming devices.”

“As you call it, voodoo,” Loki said, raising a hand and turning it while green light played between his fingers in a beautiful, otherworldly display.

Darcy looked away and lightened her windows. “Great. Wait, do you spy on me all the time?” She squinted at him. “Because that would be creepy and stalkerish. You’re creepy enough already.”

“This was the first time,” Loki said.

“Hmmm,” Darcy said.

Her desk chimed, and she looked down. Calendar notification. “All right, Magic Mike, if you want to stay, you get to sit there and not make noise. I’ve got a few people coming in to give me an end-of-the-day rundown and then I’m out of here.” For a blind date with Jane’s buddy Mr. Nice Guy Rory Taylor. “Capiche?”

“I understand perfectly,” Loki said.

“Right.” Darcy fired off a quick message on Sparknet, the internal messaging system of the company, calling her top aides into her office.


“My new decoration,” Darcy said. “Like a painting, except he’s mobile and can get me coffee. Ignore him.” She hid a smirk, knowing full well her dismissal would irritate Loki. “I passed off the script to Dr. Fisher just now; he’ll handle the press tomorrow but I want one of you there just as a backup.”

“I can handle it,” Shawn said. “I’m free that hour.”

“Awesome. And, Veronica, nice job cleaning up that lawsuit with TerraCorp—why are you shaking your head?”

Veronica sighed noisily. “Well, they dropped the first lawsuit, as you saw, but now there’s another one. The Hammond R&D facility out in Montana? Apparently there’s an endangered bird species in the area and they want us to shut it down completely.”

“We’re testing water purifiers out there,” Mason protested. “What does that have to do with birds? That facility’s barely twenty acres!”

Veronica threw her hands up. “I know that, and it’s less than two percent of the land those birds live on. Not to mention, all that land is owned by some environmentally sensitive celebrity who’s never going to sell it, so it’s not like we could expand that facility even if we wanted to. I’d tell him to buy up rainforest or that old growth land in Northern California if he’s so concerned—”
“Guys,” Darcy interrupted. “What’s the actual content of the lawsuit?”

“Disruption of the environment,” Veronica said, and dropped a drive on the desk. Darcy drew a circle around it on the glass surface and the desktop automatically initiated a data transfer. “That’s everything the lawyers gave me. Court date is in a month and a half, so we’ve got some time to sort this out before it goes to the legal team.”

Darcy tapped her chin. “Ideas?”

The meeting took an hour. Darcy was exhilarated by the time they were done; stuff like this was her forte. People and politics and problem-solving. Even though it wasn’t exactly what she wanted to be doing (changing the world), she was still using her skill set. And enjoying herself.

“Brava,” Loki said quietly.

“Hu-oh. Yeah, I know, I’m pretty great,” Darcy agreed. She’d almost forgotten he was there. Somehow he’d dimmed his presence during the meeting, but it was back now, a constant subconscious awareness of where he was in the room. She’d seen the other Avengers react similarly and was pretty sure it had something to do with his magic.

“I can indeed see why Stark chooses to employ you in this manner,” Loki said. “This is the sort of service you perform for the Avengers?”

“Yeah. Stark pays me for this, technically, but I delegate to those three and spend about half my time in my office upstairs, dealing with things for the Avengers.”

“This is what you studied for? Business?” Loki said. “In… university.” She’d been talking to him about how education worked on Earth. “Nah. Political science.”

“Statecraft,” he said. “Impressive.”

Darcy felt an irrational thrill of excitement at the word statecraft. That was exactly what she wanted to do.

“Yeah, well. I might’ve learned stuff geared toward government, but it works just as well here,” she said with a grin, trying to blow it off as funny.

Loki didn’t play along. “Do you regret having chosen this path?”

“What, working for Jane?” Darcy shook her head. “Never. It’s not like little old me would’ve gotten anywhere in government, anyway. I’m no one. Just a ward of the state who went to public school on the taxpayer’s dime.” Bitterness crept under those words (they weren’t hers, originally) and she forced herself to relax her grip on the arms of her chair. It didn’t deserve such treatment. “And then I wouldn’t have met Jane. I got mad skills, I’m using them, it’s cool.”

“No, it’s not,” Loki said, examining her carefully. “You are… resentful. Stifled, perhaps. Frustrated?”

“Stop psychoanalyzing me,” Darcy snapped. “So what if I wish I could do more? I don’t have an opportunity and no idea how to make one. No way in hell would I run for office, but–”

She clamped her mouth shut, but the damage was done.

Loki looked triumphant. “You do desire something more,” he said. “I thought as much. A stymied
dreamer, a diplomat trapped in the business world.”

Darcy glared at him. She so did not want to talk about this.

But then again, Loki was maybe the only person who wouldn’t take it badly. Jane would be guilty, the rest of the Avengers would feel bad. Which was why she never talked about her ambitions to any of them. It wasn’t like it would help anything. She’d tell them when she got somewhere. She was slowly building a network of contacts and allies, favors owed and debts paid, in the political scene; she couldn’t not, with the Avengers dealing more and more with the government and the UN as a separate militarized entity. One day, Darcy’s plans would be in place, she’d see an opportunity, and she’d take it. But complaining or wishing didn’t get you anywhere.

It still might be nice to talk about it. And it wasn’t like Loki could use anything against her. Darcy habitually hid her dreams from people so they wouldn’t get taken away. But she wanted so badly to trust him. So she’d test him a little.

“Okay, yeah, fine,” she said. “I want to get into politics. Behind the scenes. Like a–remember that book about political structure, the one with a chapter on fixers?”

“I do,” Loki said.

“Okay. One of them.”

“It suits you,” he offered.

“I know it does, you don’t need to feed me platitudes,” she said impatiently. “I’m not looking to like boost my self-confidence.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “I am fairly sure that the word ‘like’ in this language is not a preposition.”

“There’s the asshole I know,” Darcy said, but without temper. “So yeah. A fixer. Behind the scenes, holding the power but no one knows. Not on television, not on the ballot, nowhere subject to the fickle media. Standing in the shadows.” She could see it in her head. Not a specific image, but the feeling. Of—“Quiet power, waiting in the wings while others took the credit and the medals, paparazzi and people alike unaware that they’re just puppets and I pull the strings. There’s so much shit going on in the world, you know? Employment, poverty, disease. Corruption and overreach in government, bureaucratic bloat, idiots running this country. All the countries. I could change things for the better.”

She realized her passion had crept into her voice and she was leaning forward, eyes alight and hands gesturing animatedly. Darcy abruptly dropped them into her lap and sat up straighter, smiling halfheartedly, hiding all her fire behind flippancy and humor. It was a reflex born in a period of her life she’d rather forget. “Didn’t mean to go all ranty on you.”

“I found it fascinating,” Loki said softly. His eyes were trained on her, and he’d dropped the illusion there; instead of pale blue they were his normal poison green. The intensity of his stare was intoxicating. “What of a monarchy, then? Or an empire? Should you be offered the opportunity to rule and rule alone, what would you choose?”

“I—” Darcy wanted to say no, but the words stuck in her throat. She didn’t think she could lie to him and hide it. Not Loki. And silence would basically answer his question, so she said, “My first choice would be to have a puppet ruler, honestly.”

Loki smiled.
“But.” Darcy frowned. “I mean… yeah, I’d probably take it.” She squinted at Loki. “For a decade at least. Get things on the right track. Then I’d implement a democracy. Those are better in the long run. But sometimes when things are going to shit you need one leader, you know?”

“When a starship faces demise, the captain delivers the orders and there is no confusion because there is only one authority,” Loki said, nodding. “The same principle applies to military units: in battle there is no time for votes or referendums, only orders given and followed. You must give a certain amount of improvisational space to your commanders, and choose them with care, so that they work in the parameters they are most effective, but it is the central authority that guides them all.”

“Exactly,” Darcy said. “But when everything’s going peachy, or like over long periods of time, people’s opinions can change. So I’d want to set things straight and then split power to elected representatives, make sure the system was strong, and then I’d, I don’t know, retire to an island.”

“You would not be able to walk away,” Loki said. He was mirroring her posture: leaning forward, eyes focused between them, fully engaged. “Power is addicting.” His lips quirked. “I’d know. Would it ever be enough?”

Darcy met his eyes.

“Was it ever enough for you?”

She already knew the answer. She knew why he’d tricked Thor, what happened that led to the Puente Antiguo mess.

“No,” Loki admitted. “Satisfaction is not in my nature.”

“Mine either,” Darcy said. “Why would you ever want to stop, though? Like, if you’re still steering the right way, and you can, why wouldn’t you hang on to the reins?”

Loki angled his head. “Nothing great was ever accomplished by a being without ambition,” he said.

“That’s it,” Darcy said. Her chest ached with wanting something she didn’t have.

The silence stretched.

She leaned back and grinned. “But it’s just hypothetical. No one likes monarchies much anymore. Or dictatorships.”

“No on this planet,” Loki said.

Darcy snorted. “Right. Because it’d totally be possible for me to get an army and go a-conquering across the realms. Wouldn’t that be hilarious, a bastard kid from Midgard dragging her realm into space wars.” She looked around. “This is what I have. No sense in dreaming, right?”

But she didn’t believe that, and based on the look Loki gave her, he knew she didn’t mean it.

“Dreams are useless unless there is ambition to fuel them,” Loki said. “Which I believe you have in excess.”

Darcy wanted to kiss him. Damn her date.

Her corporate phone rang.

She actually jumped a little. Loki leaned back as well, seeming almost–surprised–before he tucked
the expression away.

“Sorry,” she said. “I should… take this.”

“By all means,” he said, with a graceful wave of his hand.

Darcy took a few seconds to center herself. If her corporate phone was ringing, that meant someone down in the telecommunications department thought it was important to send right to her. “Stark Industries Press Relations Department, Darcy Lewis speaking,” she said, adopting a professional tone even though the way Loki was looking at her made her feel exposed and vulnerable.

“Darcy?”

That voice. Her whole body went cold, the glow of discussing her ambitions with someone who got it doused beneath icy water. Loki sat up intently, noting the change in her demeanor, but Darcy barely noticed. “What—who is this?” she demanded.

“It’s Ralph. Your father?”

Darcy couldn’t quite move.

His voice brought all the memories back.

She is eleven and hiding with Lizzie in a fort of blankets and pillows, whispering stories into her little sister’s ear while their parents raged around the house.

She is nine and carrying Lizzie at a painful jog through the snow.

She is thirteen and screaming until she tastes blood, screaming words back in his face, words she doesn’t mean, calculating behind her anger and fear, drawing his rage so Lizzie will stay safe.

She is fifteen and acing her classes, staying up late to do her homework by flashlight, while working three jobs to keep Lizzie in the Morris Institute.

She is sixteen and sprinting home, heart in her throat, terror like she’s never known pounding through her heart, palms bleeding from when she fell and got back up. She wants it not to be true, begs a God she doesn’t believe in for it to not be true. But it is true, and then she is standing in a graveyard on a day as gray as her mood, a dress as black as her fury, blood as red as her ambition beating through her veins. She is sixteen and on her own, sixteen and walking away from her father’s home with no regrets, a ward of the state in a system that often fails despite its good intentions for the children in its care, adrift and penniless and alone in a world that does not care. She has nothing to rely on except the fire in her belly and it’s because of him.

Hands on her face brought her back.

Darcy blinked hard and realized Loki had moved forward, crouching in front of her chair. His hands cupped her face lightly. “Darcy,” he murmured, eyes searching hers. “There you are.”

Thank you, Darcy thought but did not say. “We had an agreement,” she said into the phone, and was proud of how steady her voice was. “You never contact me and I never bother you again.”

“You’re not still holding that against me, are you?” Ralph whined.

“What are you referring to, Dad?” she snarled, and Loki’s eyes widened. His hands slipped down from her cheeks to her shoulders, and then he was simply crouching there, still almost her height,
with his right hand lightly covering her left where it sat on the desk. She couldn’t bring herself to ask him to leave. Somehow Loki had become a person she trusted enough to lean on in this moment, which was a problem to figure out later. “Years of bruises? That broken arm in third grade? Two years in foster care? The drinking and your druggie friends who used to grope me in the front hall? I could keep going.”

Loki’s face was tight. His illusion was gone.

“Oh, come on, you’re exaggerating,” Ralph said, and now his voice was coaxing, wheedling. Pathetic worm. “You’re misremembering all that stuff. It wasn’t so bad, was it? We had a nice life there for a while, and–”

“What do you want, Ralph?” she snapped.

He paused. “I tracked you down,” he said instead of an answer. “I reckon any daddy’d want to know what his daughter’s up to after almost ten years. Now you’ve got some fancy high-rise job. Stark Industries, huh?” He laughed, and she remembered this: such a horrible sound. They invented the word ‘guffaw’ for Ralph’s laugh. “I hear Stark’s pretty hot for the ladies. You tappin’ that?”

Darcy’s grip tightened on the phone. “So it’s money you want.”

“Naw, I got plenty of that now,” Ralph said, his tone distinctly braggy. “I just want to see you, is that too much to ask? I’m your dad, I want to see my little girl.”

“I’m not your anything,” Darcy said. “Don’t call me again. You can go to hell.”

She got the phone an inch from her ear and heard him shout, “Darcy, wait–”

“You are under no obligation to continue this conversation,” Loki murmured, so quietly Darcy knew it’d never get through the phone.

She paused.

“What?” she snapped.

Ralph exhaled. Relieved. “Listen. Is it really too much to ask that I have a normal relationship with my only daughter?”

And that was too much.

“I’m not your only daughter,” Darcy snarled. “Remember Lizzie? Remember the kid I busted my ass for for years since you were too high or drunk or busy hitting me to ever help us? Remember how you killed her?”

Loki’s hand tightened fractionally around Darcy’s. She knew if she looked up she’d see fury on his face and wouldn’t be able to hold it together, so she kept her eyes squeezed tightly shut.

“Come on now,” Ralph said, “you know the accident wasn’t my fault. I wasn’t even driving!”

“You put her in that car,” Darcy told him in her coldest voice. “You were drunk and high and God knows what else and kidnapped an autistic kid from school and put her in a car with a drunk driver against her will and your buddy drove that car off a bridge and she died. The court might’ve let you off lightly but I won’t. For the last time, Ralph, fuck. Off.”

She slammed the phone down on the table, breathing hard.
Darcy realized she was shaking. She sucked air in and out through her teeth, glaring at the floor. Ralph’s voice had torn old wounds open again.

*Get yourself under control you are stronger than this*

Loki lifted her chin with a light touch. “Darcy,” he said.

She met his eyes.

The anger on his face mirrored her own. “It would be a simple matter to make his life a living hell,” Loki said, soft and vicious.


Loki’s hand fell away from her face. “It does not take away the pain of humiliation, or of loss,” he said. “Nothing will bring back your sister. But I have always found satisfaction in reprisals for those who have hurt me or mine.”

Darcy nodded slowly. “Ask me again in a few weeks,” she said. “This probably isn’t a decision I should make right now when I’m this pissed.”

Loki half smiled. “Very wise.”

Darcy took one more breath and stood. “Okay. Shit. I’m late.”

“Have you plans tonight?” Loki said. “If you desire companionship, I could accompany you.”

*Oh fuck.*

Darcy wanted nothing more than to take him up on that. She could see it: sitting at a bar, a few glasses of wine down, laughing and speaking openly about things that none of her other friends got.

Which told her a few things. One, she considered Loki a friend. Two, she already cared way more than she should. And three, she didn’t want to hurt him by saying no, which led to four, that she believed Loki cared enough to be hurt by a rejection.

Fuckity.

“I… actually have a date,” Darcy said. “Jane set me up with a friend of hers for the night.” *Not that I expect it to go well. And I’m late.*

“Ah,” Loki said. Darcy thought maybe that was disappointment that flicked across his face, but she couldn’t be sure. Normally she could read people pretty damn well, but Loki was an exception. “Enjoy your date, Miss Lewis,” he said with a polite dip of his head, and drew his illusion back over his features. “I shall leave you to your preparations, then.”

She wanted to call him back. Wanted to ask him to stay, or go with her. But Darcy reminded herself how dumb that would be and bit her tongue.

“You better be right about Mr. Nice Guy, Jane,” she grumbled, collected her purse, and headed out for the night.

*Chapter End Notes*
I know you've all been eager to learn more about Darcy's past, so here you go! A window into the walled-up fortress that is Darcy Lewis. This chapter was pretty difficult to write, but I love how it turned out and I'm glad to finally get to post it. Also, Loki is fantastic.

On another note, I have this piece of original fiction I've been working on the last few days. It's almost done. Would you guys want to read it if I posted it as a separate work? It's got the whole superheroes-and-supervillains trope but turned kind of upside down, which is one of my favorite things to do writing, and a fun female MC. Let me know if you'd be interested!
Loki decided to calm his mind by cooking.

It wasn’t so different from spellcasting, or studying, and it engaged his hands as well as his mind. He’d often used a private corner of the palace kitchens in his childhood to settle himself when he needed an escape from Thor and his pack of warriors-in-training.

“Who’s making foo–oh what the hell,” Clint said, skidding to a stop in the doorway. “I thought you were a prince or something, how do you know how to cook?”

Loki narrowed his eyes. What are you doing in the kitchens, you mestagg? the other children jeered in his mind.

“How I choose to spend my time is not your prerogative,” he said stiffly. He would not stand for another set of warrior-people to use him as their performing festival creature or source of entertainment. If that’s what this became–

“Whoa, chill, it’s cool,” Clint said, sliding onto a bar stool. “I can’t cook to save my life. Tasha says it’s because I’m too impatient.”

“There is a certain degree of patience required,” Loki agreed, speaking slowly. He’d paused midway between the refrigerator and the heating device they called an “oven,” peering at Clint. Searching for any sign of mockery.

He found none.

“So what’re you making?” Clint asked.

Loki hesitated.

“I am attempting to approximate a dish from Vanaheim,” he said at last. “The plants that grow on this planet are not quite the same, and it is proving more difficult than I expected.”

“More than I could do,” Clint said. “Smells amazing.”

“I… am glad you approve,” Loki said.

“You’re so awkward,” Clint muttered. “Hey, where’s Darcy?”

Loki’s hands hesitated the barest fraction of a second over the pot on the stove. He cursed himself for it and hoped Clint would not notice. “Dr. Foster has arranged for Darcy to have an evening with a friend of hers,” he said.

“Oooh, blind date. Yeah, those suck,” Clint said.

“They ‘suck’,” Loki repeated, narrowing his eyes. He could imagine multiple possible interpretations
of that statement, and none of them appealed to him. His familiar knee-jerk rage came hissing to life.

“Yeah, they can go pretty badly if the person setting you up doesn’t pick well—hold up, where are you going?”

“To ensure that Miss Lewis’ date does not harm her,” Loki said in his most reasonable voice.

Clint jumped off the stool and got in his way. “Stop. Seriously. That’s way overreactive. I meant… she just might not have fun, okay? It’s not like he’s going to… beat her up behind a Dumpster or something. Well. It’s possible. But not likely. Jane knows this guy. And she’s smart enough to watch her drinks. And she has a Taser. She’ll be fine.”

Fool, Loki thought. Making incorrect assumptions, rash decisions, and here you are looking the idiot in front of Clint. You may as well create fire letters above your head spelling out “I Care About Darcy Lewis”. “Taser,” he mused. “The lightning weapon with which she disabled Thor, no?”

“Yeah,” Clint said, and relaxed when Loki returned to the kitchenette space. “She always carries it, and a knife. I’ve been teaching her how to use them both. No worries, Mime.”

“Mime?” Loki repeated incredulously. Allspeak translated the word as a mummer’s farce played on one of Asgard’s holidays. “That is far worse than… ‘Gravity Man,’ or those other foolish monikers.”

“That’s cold,” Clint said, not looking overly concerned. “Hey, are you making enough food for all of us?”

Loki examined the various pans simmering or baking on the stove and in the oven. “I expect that the final product will be more than adequate in quantity.” Perhaps a meal with the Avengers—whoever was in the tower tonight—would distract him from the fact that Darcy was out in the city with another man. From the glimpse into her past that she’d given him that afternoon.

It made his blood boil with rage just to think of it. Between Darcy’s facial expressions, her words, those of the man on the phone (who he’d been able to hear quite clearly), and the heavy subtext of the conversation, Loki had pieced together that her childhood had been far less than idyllic, and that the man who had made it so was still alive.

He was already considering which workings would be most appropriately cruel to lay on Darcy’s father as penance for what he’d done.

But he would wait for Darcy’s request. It was her grievance to forgive or resent.

“Hey. Loki. Did that pot murder your mom or something? Because you’re glaring. And kind of… sparking,” Clint said.

Loki blinked and looked down, away from the pot to which his gaze had fixated.

Green sparks were indeed spitting from his hands.

“My apologies,” Loki said smoothly, but inside, he was shaken. It had been a long, long time since anyone got beneath his skin enough to cause his seidr to react unconsciously like that. Not a good sign.

So much for my resolution to restrict any attachment to these Midgardians. To Lady Darcy.

Hissing from the stove caught his attention.
“The meal is ready for consumption,” Loki said.

“Awesome, I’ll message the others. Jane and Bruce are here tonight… Maybe Steve, definitely Tony…” Clint trailed off, tapping away at his StarkPhone.

Loki reached out with hands and seidr to shift food from pots into bowls and platters ready to be laid out along the table. It was automatic, and he only realized halfway through that almost all the Avengers’ meals were entirely informal, on the occasions when they made a point of dining together.

It was of no consequence, he decided. They were eating Vanir dishes, and they might as well be presented with their meal in the fashion that it would be offered on Vanaheim.

Rogers was the first in the door. He hesitated, blinked in surprise. “That’s… a lot of food,” he said slowly.

Loki didn’t look at him. Best to appear casual, though in truth he was not entirely sure how to proceed with this. *Behave as though things are as usual and they will behave as such as well*, he admonished himself, and poured himself a glass of the amber liquor called Scotch of which he had grown rather fond. “You have been introducing me to an astonishing variety of Midgardian cuisine,” he said. “In return, I offer a meal such as you may be served on Vanaheim in a formal setting, though it is but an approximation. Midgardian spices and food products are not quite the same.”

Stark arrived halfway through his explanation. “Smells like a party for my taste buds,” he said, sticking a finger into a sauce in the center of the long glass table.

He froze right after he tasted the sauce. “Wait a second, am I going to drop dead of seizures if I eat this?”

“I would not dream of poisoning my esteemed hosts,” Loki said with a hint of a cunning smile. He inserted the precise quantity of sarcasm into his tone to suggest he was joking, but not enough to be entirely clear, so they would remain on edge. He swept his amusement from his face when Rogers and Clint both looked faintly alarmed.


“I’m so glad I happened to fall in with a gathering of Midgardians who appreciate sarcasm,” Loki remarked, taking his usual place at the table. Most of the Avengers tended to subconsciously congregate near the end with the windows; he typically chose a seat that would allow them to give him space if they chose. “This life would be horribly boring, otherwise.”

“Boring,” Clint scoffed, sitting down to his right. “Right. My life is so easy and simple and uneventful, says the deposed prince from outer space eating around a table with some of the weirdest people this realm’s ever produced.”

“Precisely,” Loki said.

It should not be this easy to relax in their company.

Jane and Bruce arrived a few moments later, arguing animatedly over something so technical even Allspeak struggled to accurately translate.

“Is this everyone?” Stark asked. “Sam, Natasha?”

“Natasha and Bucky are showering up,” Clint said. “She texted me and said not to wait. They spent the afternoon beating each other to a pulp in the training rooms.”
“Of course they did,” Jane muttered. “Why you jock people never stop hitting each other I do not understand–”

“We don’t get your science obsession either,” Clint objected.

“Don’t disrespect the science,” Stark said, pointing a fork at Clint. His mouth was already full of food. “Our “science obsessions” keep you employed right now, Legolas, and they made that fancy peashooter of yours too.”

“Hey!” Clint said.

“Sam’s at home tonight,” Rogers said. “He had to work at the VA today and it ran long.”

Loki hummed noncommittally and tasted his meal. He’d done a passable job imitating the balance of flavors and textures the Vanir were so proud of in their unique branch of cuisine, given the ingredients he had to work with, but it was woefully simple. He wondered what Darcy would’ve thou–

Loki shut that thought down before it could form.

“This is… really good,” Rogers said. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome,” Loki said. “It is the least I could do. You have introduced me to the wonders of pizza.”

“If only all peace treaties were that simple,” Bruce muttered.

“The end of the Yllvr–Trytan wars can be largely attributed to their emperors’ mutual appreciation for soup made in the skull of bilgesnipe,” Loki said without thinking, and then froze and withdrew behind a distant expression. That was precisely the kind of comment that would’ve gotten him mocked and scorned on Asgard, sent him retreating from the dining hall with slurs that translated to nerd and stupid useless scholar chasing behind–

There was a pause.

“Huh,” Rogers said. “I’ve… never heard of those empires. What… uh, realm are they from?”

“What care of it is yours?” he said frostily.

“You brought it up,” Stark said when Rogers looked offended and even Jane paused.

Clint leaned forward. “Loki, we’re not making fun of you,” he said. “Just so you know.”

Loki looked at him. He was most familiar with Clint (Bruce being the possible exception) of the people at this table. He knew Clint’s instincts were excellent, and that there had evidently been no mockery intended earlier, either.

“I… apologize… for my reaction,” he said, choosing his words carefully. He hated allowing himself to be this vulnerable. “My experience has been that–that speaking of such topics during meals is not of interest for people trained in combat.”

“Thor’s really an ass,” Clint said. Despite his flippancy, Loki detected real anger under the surface, and smiled internally. Thor would face much more significant consequences than he would expect should he ever deign to return to Midgard.

“I will not disagree,” Loki said. “You are… truly curious?”
“Using food to end a war?” Clint said. “Hell yeah, I can get behind that.”

“Ah... well,” Loki said. “In that case... The conflict between the Yllvr people and the Trytans lasted centuries...”

Dinner was surprisingly pleasant. He even managed, temporarily, to take his mind off of Darcy. Loki had known it, of course, but discussing the Yllvr-Trytan war and several other similar conflicts in other realms proved that Rogers’ mind was agile and clever. He had military experience and Loki found himself enjoying their conversation of tactics and strategy. Stark and Jane were more interested in the technologies developed by other cultures, while Bruce asked sharp questions about other biologies. Even Natasha and Barnes had arrived, though they seemed tired and didn’t speak much. Loki found himself answering their queries with pleasure, growing increasingly engaged as the time slipped by.

“Give me a break,” Clint said, laughing. “Fire on their wings?”

“Yes,” Loki said with a smile. “Secretions of volatile, viscous liquids which react with the air. It is a stress reflex, although some organisms have been known to gain conscious control over the ability.”

“Fascinating,” Bruce said. “What I wouldn’t give to study them.”

Loki paused.

It would not be especially difficult to create a portal and introduce Bruce to the fire-winged hrya of Vanaheim. Voidwalking was difficult for nonmages, and there was no precedent, to the best of Loki’s knowledge, for Midgardians taking portals. It wouldn’t be too difficult, however, to test with small portals that merely traveled across Midgard, or to craft a working that would shield Bruce from the worst effects of the journey.

“If you are serious in your interest...” he said slowly. “It would be possible to arrange one such journey.”

Bruce sat up straight, eyes electric. “Are you serious?”

“I’m always serious,” Loki said in a flat voice, eliciting a laugh from Clint and an appreciative snort from Stark.

“Yes,” Bruce said. “Absolutely. If it’s possible, yes.”

“It’s absolutely possible,” Loki said. “Some preparation would be necessary, of course, to ensure you would survive the journey and the environment of Vanaheim—I do not know whether the atmosphere, for example, can be processed by Midgardian bodies—but yes.”

“Thank you,” Bruce said, leaning forward. It was the most alive Loki had seen him all evening. “You have no idea how much this means to me.”

A favor given is a favor owed, Loki thought, but kept that to himself. It would only deflate the value of his offer; earning Bruce’s goodwill was important.

And so was Rogers’ good opinion. Loki glanced up the table at Rogers, silhouetted against the dark sky and brilliant lights of the nighttime city. Rogers was quite simple to read, and Loki detected a distinct air of wistfulness to his face. Barnes’ too.
“Rogers,” he said. “And Barnes. Should you wish to join us, you are welcome to do so.”

Rogers blinked. “Really?”

“I would not say it if I was not prepared for you to accept my offer,” Loki said.

In truth, he couldn’t quite tell exactly why he was making it. Even the promise of gaining their goodwill was not enough, from a purely objective stance, since they hadn’t known such a journey would be possible in the first place.

*I have grown comfortable with them*, Loki realized. *Even to like them in a way I have not liked anyone for centuries*. Even Rogers, who appeared rigid, was simply unsure of himself a large part of the time and wielded his soldierly stoicism as a defense.

“Sure,” Rogers said. “I… yeah. I’d like that.”

“Let’s make it a vacation,” Stark said, leaning forward and grinning infectiously. He only got more gregarious with every drink he consumed. “We can all go. Free tickets to see giant burning moth-things.”

“I never said it would be free for you,” Loki said with a sharp smile.

“Hoooo, he got you there!” Clint laughed, swatting Rogers’ arm. “Tasha! You coming on our realm-hopping cruise?”


“Continuous magical protection from all offrealm threats,” Loki said with a nod, keeping his face solemn. “Although I must say, this trip shall have to wait until… until Asgard no longer desires my death or imprisonment.”

Rogers and Stark shared a glance that was laden with subtext. Loki saw it, and saw Clint and Natasha notice it as well, and registered that neither of them showed surprise or confusion.

How interesting.

Loki resisted the urge to *persuade* them to tell him what they meant; it would be a simple matter to do so and then wipe their minds of the incident afterward. But there were some lines one did not cross, as a mage, with those one considered friends and allies, so Loki resolved to investigate later using less invasive means.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Clint said, and downed the last of his beer. “I’m off to bed. You need sleep too, Tony, that meeting with TerraCorp is tomorrow at nine and I gotta be there. Since technically I’m your bodyguard.”

“You do an excellent job guarding my body,” Stark said with a perfectly straight face.

“Ahhh, come on, man, you know sleeping with the boss is a terrible plan,” Clint said, laughing. “Seriously. No more of *that* -” he snatched Stark’s glass of liquor- “and you need to go sleep.”

“Yes, Mother,” Stark grumbled, but he did as Clint ordered with relatively good cheer, bidding the other Avengers good night. They were mostly sprawled out on sofas and armchairs now, rather than on the table; Barnes appeared to be half-asleep with his head on Natasha’s shoulder.

“We should go, too,” Natasha said, shaking him gently awake. “Zima.”
Barnes sat up, instantly alert. Soldier training. “Mmm?”

“Bed?” Natasha asked.

He nodded once and stood with her. “Loki,” he said, a goofy little smile hovering on his face. “Remind me to bring popcorn for the Stark-versus-fire-moths show, because that’s going to be entertaining.”

*So there is a sense of humor in there.* Barnes was recovering, and this was a good sign of it. Loki glanced at Steve and saw the hope and happiness written all over him.

“I shall certainly do so,” Loki said. “And extra for myself.”

Barnes’ grin got a little larger, and he left with Natasha. Bruce and Jane followed soon after, claiming exhaustion, though Loki noticed they both took the elevator down to the labs rather than up to the floors on which the Avengers lived.

Rogers tapped the coffee table thoughtfully, twice, drank the last of his beer, and rose. “I’m off too. Are you waiting for Darcy?” he asked.

Loki almost lied. “Yes,” he said slowly.

“Huh.” Rogers was examining him closely. “She’s been helping you a lot, right? With… adjusting?”

“She has.”

Rogers paused. “Don’t hurt her, Loki.”

He didn’t think Rogers was referring to blows. “I have no intention of doing so,” Loki replied, injecting as much sincerity into his voice as possible.

Rogers nodded once and headed for the door.

Loki watched him go, Scotch in hand.

Rogers paused by the stairs leading up. “Oh,” he said, “and you can call me Steve. If you want.”

He waited, but when Loki said no more, he left the room.

Interesting.

Loki refilled his glass and went to stand by the windows. Darcy would have to come through here; the elevators from the lower floors went no higher than this story. And he had all the patience that over a thousand years of life could foster. It was not his *natural* reaction–Loki was unfortunately prone to rash decisions, and knew it–but patience was necessary for all the best plans.

So he would wait.

And in the meantime, he would enjoy the view of the city below.

It was beautiful, in a sharp-edged way. There was none of Asgard’s stately, sweeping architecture and golden light, no sense of millennia of tradition seeping from the earth. New York was bustling and bright and cutting-edge, the embodiment of Midgardian ambition and flux. The antithesis of everything stifling about the realm of Loki’s childhood.

He leaned forward and pressed his forehead to the glass of the bay windows. It was cool and
comfortingly solid against his skin.

When the doors swished open, Loki was slow to react. By the time he turned around, Darcy was halfway into the room, looking exhausted and vulnerable and terrifyingly appealing in the muted glow of the city.

“Loki?” she said uncertainly.

Chapter End Notes

A couple of you expressed interest in the original thing I wrote. So, it's up! Posted on my dash as "Double Life", haha. The plot twist isn't very subtle but it was super fun to write. It was supposed to be a quick thing and then it turned into 11,000 words like ??? anyway, hope you like it:) And thank you all so much for the amazing reaction to my last chapter!!
Avengers Tower

November 2011

Darcy was so tired she scrambled to pull herself together.

“Darcy.” Loki stepped forward. The whole scene had an eerie, dreamlike feeling. His face was cast in sharp shadows that emphasized its angles. His eyes gleamed with reflected light.

She took a breath and tried to steady herself. “It’s past midnight. I thought… I kind of figured everyone would be in bed by now.”

“I waited,” Loki said simply.

Oh, damn. “Why?”

He prowled closer. “To ensure that all is right with you.”

“I… yeah. I’m good,” Darcy said. It was a lie, and a terrible one; she was too tired to put up a convincing front. She really just wanted to go faceplant in her bed, sleep for nine hours, and then go rant to Jane about stupid sheep people (sheeple?), but apparently that was too much to ask of the universe because now she had to deal with this, too.

“Are you truly?” Loki asked. “Or would you simply prefer not to speak of it to me?”

“What would you do if I said the second one?” Darcy asked.

“Leave.” He shrugged, the Scotch in his hand sparkling with the movement. “It is not my place to force your confidence from you.”

Darcy sighed through her nose and flopped down on the couch. She couldn’t even muster the energy to care that she’d wrinkle her dress. “I really wish guys on Earth were more like you,” she grumbled. “Also that it were easier to dislike you.”

Loki sat down next to her, almost hesitantly, with plenty of space between them. Darcy wanted to scoot closer and also wanted to run away. “Did something happen tonight? Did he harm you?”

Something cold and wrathful and not human flickered in his eyes. “No, he didn’t… hurt me,” Darcy said. “I watch my drinks carefully. And if he’d tried anything he’d be unconscious in a jail cell right now.” She patted her purse with satisfaction. “Got my trusty Taser. No, he didn’t seem like a bad guy, just… annoying as shit. Boring. Shallow, in love with golf and talking. I couldn’t like talk about anything with him, and then he started going on and on and on about golf.” She threw up her hands, warming to the subject. “I don’t even have a problem with golf! I mean, to me it’s boring as shit, but like some people like it, and that’s fine! What’s not fine is that Mr. So-called Nice Guy didn’t stop talking about golf for an hour. And I tried to like ask more interesting questions but he’s so shallow, if he were a puddle, I could see my reflection in it.” And the whole time, I kept thinking how much more fun it would’ve been if I’d gone with you instead, she thought but didn’t–couldn’t–say.

“Mmm,” Loki said. “That does sound… distinctly unpleasant.”

“Oh yeah,” Darcy said, and leaned back with her eyes closed. “Unpleasant.” She snorted.
“Sometimes I wonder why I even bother with guys anymore. Best relationship I’ve ever been in by a long shot was a girl.”

Loki shifted slightly. “I did not know you consider women as well.”


“No,” Loki said. “On Asgard, my generation does not particularly care.”

He seemed totally sincere. “Mkay. Yeah. Her name was Marya.” Darcy smiled a little bit at the memories. They were bittersweet, but at least she could think past her grief to the good parts now.

“What happened?” Loki asked.

“She died. Car accident,” Darcy shrugged without sitting up, or opening her eyes. “It was years ago, we were in college. It’s actually why I met Jane. I was wrecked for a few months, failed four classes. I started the internship with her to make up the credits that summer and just… didn’t quit. I miss Marya, every day, but she’d want me to live, you know? Better to have loved and lost than never loved at all, and all that jazz. So I kept trying, dated around in the last year of college, guys and girls. Never found anyone like her.”

“Your strength is admirable,” Loki said softly. “I am sorry for your loss.”

Enough about me. Darcy flipped over so she was curled up on her side on the couch, propped up against its back and facing him, knees drawn up. “What about you? Any sad stories? While we’re being morbid.”

She thought she saw a hint of a smile. He shifted as well, finding a more relaxed posture and coming a little closer. “There has never been anyone for me as Marya was to you,” he said.

“Never? How old are you again?”

“Over one thousand years, by your calendar.”

“Oh,” Darcy said softly. That was… horribly sad. And also, take that, Jane, she’d been right about Loki’s age. Ish.

He dismissed it with a wave of his hand. “I have had relationships. Affairs, you would call them. Primarily physical or political motives, and the women I was with always knew it, if the former. Not always if the latter was my motivation.” His tone turned slightly bitter, self-mocking. “Most of them preferred Thor. I did have a friend, in my youth, named Sif. You may know her.”

Darcy grinned. “Oh yeah, she made an impression all right.”

“She has that effect on most people,” Loki said wryly. This was the most real she’d ever seen him.

“Doesn’t seem like your type, though. Friends or lovers,” Darcy said.

Loki chuckled. “Oh, she is not, anymore. There was a time, once… She has a relatively significant talent for seidr, did Thor ever tell you that? Nowhere near as powerful as myself, but enough to be well worth developing. My mother, Frigga, taught us together when we were young. For several decades, Sif and I were inseparable.

“But Thor came home. Odin had taken him on an extended journey to learn the martial arts from other cultures, and once he arrived, the golden warrior prince everyone loved, Sif became
decreasingly interested in developing her ability with *seidr*. I tried to convince her that it was possible to be both mage and warrior, but she did not believe me. She was so concerned with Thor, Thor that, proving herself, becoming the best warrior Asgard had ever seen…” His voice trailed off. “She never joined in when they mocked me for my scholastic or thaumaturgical pursuits, but neither did she make any perceptible effort to curb either Thor and his friends’ excesses or their bullying. Should you speak to her now, she would behave as if we had never been more than passing acquaintances.”

“You didn’t have a lot of friends, did you?” Darcy asked.

Loki smiled bitterly. “None, in truth, after Sif. Asgard values those like Thor. Big, powerful. Warriors to the core. The Aesir are so steeped in their twisted honor that any kind of trickery or plotting leaves you a pariah. I fight with my brain instead of brute force; they shunned me for that as well.” He shrugged.

“Sounds lonely.”

“I have been lonely for most of my life,” Loki said simply. No complaint, no whine to his voice. He was just stating a fact. Which Darcy figured actually made it sadder. “In truth, you Avengers are the closest to kindred spirits I have ever known. Ambitious. Willing to push the limits of what is possible. Impatient, hungry for something more. Capable of doing what is necessary to achieve your aims.”

“You wanted to rule Asgard,” Darcy said softly. She wanted to know why. “Right? Sit on the throne, tons of servants, feasts every night?”

“I am a creature of luxury,” Loki admitted, “but that is not why I desired the throne. I was a prince; I had every convenience available from centuries of magic and technology at my disposal. I wanted to rule because… I suppose the power was alluring. And the ability to change.” His voice took on an added note of intensity. “Asgard is so set in its ways. Nothing has become substantially different in thousands of years. And some of their traditions are valuable. Some are worth keeping. But I wanted to shake it from its stagnation, repair the damage Odin has done.”

“What, does he just like not care?” Darcy asked. She was fascinated. By his description of Asgard—it made sense that people who lived that long ended up petrified—but also by *him*. This was Loki, engaged. Loki, passionate.

“He believes that he can continue as he has gone on for millennia,” Loki said. “That circumstances that arise now can be ignored or solved with the same strategies he took five thousand years ago. He does not see the changing weave—I suppose you would call it fate, but the order of things, the…” Frustration colored his voice. “There is a structure to the universe. Everything falls into order and balance eventually.”

“Equilibrium,” Darcy said. She remembered that much from science classes.

“Yes. Exactly. Atoms, stars, black holes—matter to energy and back again. It is a cycle and every disruption will eventually be absorbed, no matter how great. You could consider the existence of this universe a disruption—one day it will collapse back into the void from whence it came. Societies are the same. No war is too great to forever upset the balance, but there are flux points in time, moments of opportunity when crucial decisions hang in the balance and old ages give way to the new. Powerful people, the choices of empires, the birth of a war or the signing of peace. Things are changing. Midgard is emerging into the Nine Realms, Jotunheim’s power has been broken, Asgard has, for the first time in millennia, been shaken upon its foundations. Old fault lines are being exposed as the pressure increases, both within the society of the Aesir and between the Realms as a
whole. And Odin refuses to acknowledge any of this."

Darcy’s eyes were wide. “That’s, uh. Interesting. Are you one of those crucial people?”

“Perhaps,” Loki said with a clever smile. “Perhaps you are as well, Darcy Lewis.” He reached out and brushed back a piece of her hair. “The Avengers are key to Midgard’s future, in one way or another, and you possess significant power to guide their path.”

She wanted that, Darcy realized. Wanted to be one of the people on which that balance turned. Wanted that kind of power, influence, because she knew she could help make the world better.

“I’m no one,” she said, tasting someone else’s words in her mouth for the second time today but unable to bite them back. “Just a random kid from the middle of nowhere. What could I do?”

“Who told you that?” Loki asked.

Darcy heaved out a breath. “My dad.”

“Who you spoke to this afternoon on the telephone.”

“Yep.” She grinned weakly. “Charmer, isn’t he?”

“What happened?” Loki asked.

He’d given her a glimpse into his past. Darcy might as well return the favor. She had no reason to think he’d been less than honest. “My little sister, Lizzie. She was autistic. It’s a… developmental disorder where a kid’s brain gets unbalanced in utero. Like, there’s a spectrum, from more autistic to less, and a threshold somewhere—I didn’t study enough cognitive psych to really go into detail, but basically she was brilliant with math and numbers, not so much with people. Didn’t really connect to or trust anyone except me. And I loved her more than anything else in the world. Worked illegally starting when I was twelve so I could cover the fees for the Morris Neuroscience Institute, a… school for neuroatypical kids. Helps them learn how to cope with the world since their brains don’t work quite like other people’s. She loved it there.” Darcy had to smile, remembering. “She’d call me once a week and tell me about the other kids—there was this girl Emma who was just as smart as Lizzie, and apparently they’d sit together and talk in nothing but numbers for hours. I met the teachers; they were great. Really got her, you know? More than anyone except me. And they were so good at helping her. She was doing way better, going to classes at a public middle school nearby when I was sixteen. Wanted to be an accounting detective—it’s this job where corporations like call you in to go through all their money when they have a discrepancy and figure out what’s going wrong.

“Ralph—our dad—he always hated that she went there. Thought she needed more of the bright lights, loud noises, tons of people kind of environment that she had a hard time dealing with, thought Morris was a bunch of softhearted pansies, totally disconnected from reality. He thought Lizzie could just “get over it” or some shit.” At some point, Loki had moved forward, or maybe Darcy had. Their knees were touching on the sofa; both of them were sitting sideways, facing each other. Loki covered Darcy’s hand with his own as her anger built. “One night, I was staying at a youth hostel to get away from him for a few hours. He got drunk and high on some shitty experimental drug, got in his car with his buddy, drove up to Morris, broke into her dorm room, and dragged her out. She screamed loud enough that the staff woke up and came, but by then Ralph had her in the car and they were gone. Cops were called, but… it was too late.” Darcy knew her face was tight with fury. “Ralph’s friend, also drunk and tripping on something, wrapped the car around a tree. He and Lizzie both died. Dad did three years for negligence, and I ended up in foster care. His trial was the last time I saw or spoke to him. Until today.”
Darcy hadn’t offered Loki any platitudes, and he offered none to her. Thankfully. “You have not forgiven him, then.”

“Hell no,” Darcy said savagely. “Hello, three years in a low security prison? For murder? I still think the judge was paid off or something. I got her fired years ago, but everyone was like, “success is the best revenge” and “he doesn’t matter anymore,” so I left Ralph alone. But now I’ve got success. More than he could even dream of, being completely lacking in imagination. And it doesn’t feel like revenge. More like… running away.”

“My previous offer stands,” Loki said. “There are some… creatively cruel… workings I could lay on him.”

“Uhhh… I appreciate the offer,” she said. “But if I decide to get some payback, I want it to be me.”

Loki smiled. “There’s the Darcy I know.”

“That’s why we get along,” Darcy said darkly. “We both hold grudges and we’re too ambitious for our own good.”

“Ambition is the driving force behind all great accomplishments,” Loki retorted. “And holding grudges–taking penance–ensures that others in the future will think twice before crossing you. I don’t see how either is a problem.”

“Man after my own heart,” Darcy said without thinking.

Then she realized what she’d said. “I–oh, shit, I didn’t mean it like that–”

_I totally did, fuck fuck fuck_

Loki’s hand was still covering her own. His grip tightened for a fraction of a second, and then he pulled away and held it out, palm up. A silent question, or a challenge.

Darcy’s mouth was dry. She met his green eyes and wondered what would happen if she took it.

He’s fucking immortal, you moron, she snarled at herself, and stood up abruptly. “I’m–really tired,” she said. “Now’s a good time to go to sleep.” Alone.

Loki’s hand fell back to his side, and he looked up at her from the couch. Face unfathomable in the dark angled shadows cast by his cheekbones and eyebrows and nose. “As you will, Miss Lewis,” he said quietly.

Darcy tried not to feel like she was running away from something she should fight for. For a second she hovered on the edge of–something. Sitting back down. Taking back the answer she’d given. Staying and seeing where this went. She wanted to know what it was like to kiss him, to find out what he could do with his clever hands.

But he probably didn’t care. Not really. He was immortal, and a prince, and she was just a kid from Ohio with nothing going for her but her fire and her brain. He’d definitely have met other women, Aesir women, who were prettier and smarter and not as weird, and she’d look pretty good while he was stuck here on ass-backward Midgard but she wouldn’t be anyone’s mistress. Wouldn’t be the girl he used to pass the time. Wouldn’t be that pathetic sycophantic person who cared so much and knew their partner cared so little and desperately denied all of it.

“Goodnight, Loki,” she said in a steady voice, and left him there in the dark.
White House, Washington, D.C.

December 2011

“I can’t believe he’s doing this right before Christmas,” Darcy complained. “It’s like a week away!”

Tony showed her a StarkPad. “Jane found the Christmas lights.”

“Shit,” Darcy said. “She gets them tangled up every year, why she keeps trying I have no idea, I keep telling her not to bother—”

Steve leaned forward. “I just got a message from Maria,” he said. “She’s hiding the rest of the lights.”

Darcy beamed at him. “You’re the best, Stevie.”

Stevie. The last person who’d called him Stevie was his infuriatingly condescending third-grade teacher. Somehow, coming from Darcy, it wasn’t nearly so annoying.

Steve had been a little worried about Darcy lately; she’d seemed kind of… distant. Colder. He suspected it involved the date she’d come back from last month and refused to speak about. And there was a strange dynamic between her and Loki; they seemed almost on edge around each other, slightly too polite to be genuine. Steve was glad she was still joking around, glad she had thrown herself into Christmas so enthusiastically.

His phone dinged.

Steve looked down and choked.

“What?” Tony demanded, grabbing for the phone.

Steve recovered and started laughing too hard to talk. He just handed the picture over to Darcy.

“Oh my God,” she said, cackling. “That is fantastic.”

“What?” Tony repeated.

Darcy controlled herself. “Liam made the Christmas lights wrap around—uh—his friend.” She nodded toward Steve, who appreciated the caution; their limo had picked them up from the airport and it was probably bugged. Best not to say Bucky’s name, and to use Loki’s alias. “He’s now chasing Liam around the tower wrapped in Christmas lights that he can’t get off.” She angled the phone so Tony could see it, too, and he snorted out a laugh.

“We should booby trap his gift,” Tony said. “I’m thinking confetti. Maybe water balloons.”

“We’re getting L-Liam a gift?” Steve said with furrowed brows. “What would he even want?”

“He’s a nerd,” Darcy said with a grin. “So Tony and I are going to buy him an online course in computers and basic Internet and programming stuff.”

“The one I took?” Steve asked. They’d made him take something like that during the summer to catch him up on modern technology.
Darcy shrugged. “Not the exact one, but similar, yeah.”

“Has anyone explained Christmas to him?” Steve said.

“Sam. Last week.” Darcy snorted. “That was an entertaining conversation.”

“I’m so glad we have Christmas,” Tony muttered. “We can take a break from busting Hydra’s asses and stick with pranking each other instead.”

“You started the whole prank war when you filled my office with feathers,” Darcy retorted. “I’m not sure why you’re acting all surprised that shit escalated.”

The limo slowed down.

“Guys,” Steve said. “I think we’re here.”

Darcy and Tony instantly sat up straight. Any sign of their silliness vanished, Darcy’s behind her college-student-I-don’t-care attitude and Tony’s behind the obnoxious playboy. Steve forcefully reminded himself that neither facade was real (completely) and found his own way to hide. For him, it was simple: the soldier’s efficiency was no fake, but a habit drilled into him over the course of years.

“Let’s go see our old buddy Ross,” Darcy said with a grin.

A Secret Service agent, face expressionless behind her sunglasses (which probably had a digital overlay on the inside), opened the door for them. Tony was the first out, adjusting his suit and showing no reaction to the cold bite of the December air. Darcy followed, bundled in a down trench coat over her professional suit jacket and slacks. The jacket was dark red, which she said was both in the spirit of Christmas and warm so she didn’t care about dress codes. Steve closed the door behind himself, nodded briskly to the Secret Service agent, and joined Darcy and Tony on their trek up the path.

He looked around while they walked. Steve had visited the White House once during the war, but the landscaping was different now. Everything was sleek edges, sparse and minimalist, covered in a layer of seven inches of snow. The path was dark and wet beneath his dress shoes; he heard Tony muttering about the heated pavement up ahead.

“That wing?” Darcy asked their escort.

“Yes, ma’am,” the lead agent replied.

Darcy glanced back at Steve. “Secretary of State’s actual office,” she explained.

He nodded once and went back to planning a potential fight with the Secret Service people.

They were led into an auxiliary wing of the White House, through a press briefing room and up an elevator that wasn’t nearly as nice as he might’ve expected.

Tony caught his glance and nodded once, faintly.

“Hey, uh, James Bond,” he said, poking one of the agents. “Want to explain where we’re going?”

“I’ve been instructed to take you to Secretary Ross, sir,” the agent said calmly.

Tony rolled his eyes. “You agent types really are stoic. What do they feed you, charcoal? Lollipops? Distilled freedom?”
The agent was fighting a smile. “It’s my job, sir.”

“And his is being obnoxious,” Darcy cut in.

Now the other three agents in the elevator were smiling as well. Steve couldn’t quite turn off the part of his brain that calculated he could take out two of them in that moment of distraction.

“Captain America,” the agent in charge said. Her smile was wide and infectious. “Not every day we get a celebrity in here.”

Steve squared his shoulders and reminded himself to be their idol. “Pleased to meet you, Agent,” he said.

“And you,” she said. The other agents murmured assent.

“My kid’s got a collection of your trading cards,” one of them confided. Steve could see laugh lines behind the man’s glasses and wanted nothing more than to make friends with this man. But all they ever saw was Captain America. “He’d kill for an autograph.”

“Well, I guess I better sign something, then,” Steve said with a grin that felt like a cartoon. “So you don’t have to worry about that anymore.”

The agent laughed. Tony wordlessly passed Steve a pen.

“Actually, can I get yours too, Mr. Stark? And you, Miss Lewis,” he added, almost as an afterthought. Darcy’s eyes flicked to Steve for an instant, full of quicksilver amusement.

“I’m just the PR girl,” she said, waving a hand and snapping her gum. “Your kid’ll be more impressed with Iron Man.”

Tony grinned and clapped the agent on the shoulder while Steve signed a Secret Service baseball cap. Tony did the same and tucked his pen back into his pocket.

“Thanks,” the agent said. “This’ll mean the world to him, you have no idea.”

Steve remembered screaming crowds, dancing girls, adulation and posters with his face on them. *Actually, I’m pretty sure I do.*

It came as a great relief when the elevator let them out.

“Tony Stark,” someone said. “And Captain America.”

Steve did a once-over of the hallway—empty, spare, industrial—and looked at the man who’d spoken. Fifties, gray hair and beard, stern face. Army uniform covered in medals. General Ross.

He took an instant dislike to the man he’d only heard of from Bruce and Tony.

“General,” Tony said. They shook hands.

“And Miss Lewis,” Ross said, turning to Darcy. “So nice to meet you in person.”

His tone suggested it was the opposite, but Darcy just gave him a wide smile that appeared completely genuine and stuck her hand out to shake. “It’s an honor, General.”

“Mmm,” Ross said, as if agreeing with her. “My office is this way, please.” He barely glanced at the Secret Service. “Agents, wait here to escort our guests out when we’ve finished.”
“Yes, sir,” the agent in charge said. Steve nodded to her once before he joined Darcy, Tony, and Ross in their walk down the hall.

“–things to work out between the Avengers and the United States government,” Ross was saying. He pushed open his office doors; it was a beautiful space, outfitted with the best office furniture money could buy. On the other side, the glass walls revealed a bustling, open room. The nerve center of the State Department. Ross swept his fingers over his desk and the glass darkened, cutting them off from his subordinates. “I’ve called you here today to discuss a proposal going around the UN right now.”

Called, Steve thought. Like he was their dog, to be paraded around on a leash and summoned on command. His irritation began to morph into genuine anger.

“There’s a growing faction in this country and in the international community that considers you vigilantes,” Ross said flatly. “Dangerous rogue entities, acting on your own whim and as judge, jury, and executioner.”

“Huh,” Darcy said. “You wouldn’t happen to know who’s leading this faction, would you, General? I’d love to speak with him. Or her, I guess.”

Steve’s lips twitched. He knew as well as Darcy that Ross was one of the leaders of that faction.

Ross’ face turned faintly red, but he didn’t hesitate. “I’ll have my office forward you some contacts you might find interesting,” he said, and turned his focus back to Steve. “Captain. You’re a military man; you should understand this. Every soldier requires some form of oversight or source for their authority to kill and fight. The United Nations agrees with me on this.”

“What are they gonna do, give us police badges and bulletproof vests?” Tony asked flippantly.

Ross fixed him with a glare. “They’re drafting an agreement that would place the Avengers as a militant organization under the supervision, oversight, and command of the Secretary General of the United Nations and a committee to be convened specially for the purpose of directing the Avengers.”


“We haven’t known each other very long, so you might not have noticed, but I don’t do well with taking orders,” Tony said.

Ross picked up a folder full of paper and held it toward Tony.

“Ah, no, I don’t like being handed things,” he said.

Ross looked taken aback by Tony’s blatant refusal. Steve’s lips twitched.

“I do,” Darcy said, leaning forward to grab the folder. “Early Christmas present, how nice. I could knock someone out with this, holy crap, it’s heavy.”

Steve noticed that Ross was rapidly progressing toward a shade of fire-truck red.

Darcy flipped open the folder. Her eyebrows flew up. She scanned the first few pages and went through the rest of it in chunks. There had to be at least a hundred pages in that folder.

At last, she sat back and whistled. “Whoever typed up this mess probably has blisters on their fingers. No offense, General, but this treaty’s about as tangled as nine acres of blackberries and not half as appealing.”
Steve reached forward. “May I?”

Darcy passed him the folder.

Steve opened the top page.

*For the purpose of creating an accord to be signed by the gathered representatives of the world’s nations, this document, created 13 October 2011, will seek to outline how the militant entity known as the Avengers, which has fractured from the United States of America’s Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division’s (hereafter referred to as S.H.I.E.L.D.) project known as the Avengers Initiative, can be brought into the organization of the forces given to the United Nations to arbitrate international disputes, keep the peace, and fight human rights violations. The committee so assembled…*

Steve rubbed his temple. “This seems more likely to give the diplomats all migraines than it is to create an effective form of oversight,” he said, struggling to keep his anger in check.

“If the actual treaty is too dense, our legal people will send you the version they’re compiling for public release,” Ross said flatly.

“People whine a lot about scientists and historians writing in deliberately obtuse language to sound smarter than they are,” Tony said. “I’m starting to think diplomats do the same thing.”

Ross glared at Tony and swiped his fingers across his desk in a few quick gestures. A projector came to life, showing an image of the devastation from New York. Steve saw a green blur that was the Hulk in the top corner of the screen.

“New York,” Ross said.

He hit a button. More pictures from New York scrolled across the screen one at a time: shattered buildings, corpses, fallen skyscrapers, Chitauri craft littering the streets. Craters and ashes and overturned cars. Steve saw himself in one, mid-battle, and there was Tony, a fiery streak in the sky.

“This is the Hydra base you went after in Estonia last October,” Ross said. Steve remembered the pain of the injury he’d sustained in that fight. He didn’t remember most of the battle, but the picture told the story. Only two of seven buildings were left standing. More wreckage, more bodies.

“This is the Sinaloa base. Which mysteriously blew up despite the fact that no intel suggested they had an ammunition store large enough to cause this explosion, and despite my request that samples of the drug be preserved for further study.” He glared at Tony, then Steve. Tony was a study in unrepentance. Steve didn’t feel badly in the slightest about that decision—he was, in fact, getting more sure it had been the right one with every second he’d spent in Ross’ company—so he met the general’s eyes squarely and with no apology.

“It’s a crater now too,” Ross continued. “And in the last month and a half, you’ve taken down four Hydra bases. All on your own, all on short notice, giving the United Nations no choice but to send in support troops.”

Tony shrugged. “Of course the UN had a choice, it’s not like we marched in there shouting *send us soldiers or we’ll nuke you*. That’s ridiculous.”

“The UN can’t sit back while your little posse fights its battles and you know it,” Ross snapped. “Speaking of which, even if we set aside your insubordination and the wreckage you’ve left
“Wreckage?” Tony said incredulously. “So now you’re arguing for the preservation of Hydra? Like a living zoo? “Come on, kids, off the school bus, let’s go see a monument to evil where all the exhibits are alive”? Great plan. I’ve shared all the data I took from the facilities we’ve taken down with the UN and the US government. We’ve told you every time we went in on one of these hellholes. I don’t see how we’ve been anything but cooperative.”

Steve stepped forward, drawing Ross’ focus. Tony needed to cool off; they weren’t here to pick a fight. Although if things kept up like this he might quit trying to defuse things and watch Ross try to out-stubborn Tony Stark. “Hydra is a holdover of the Nazis, with all their zealotry and even worse principles,” Steve said steadily. “There was no chance the Avengers were going to sit back and wait. We have Rumlow and Fury on the run doing God knows what, and Hydra still has the scepter Loki used in New York. Even without the Tesseract, there’s nothing to suggest they don’t still have energy sources or weapons beyond the capability of conventional soldiers to match. Not to mention what the could do if they figure out how to work the scepter.”

“You moved too quickly,” Ross retorted.

Darcy leaned forward. “General, are you implying that it would’ve been better to wait? What conceivable reason could there be for that course of action? The longer we wait, the more time Fury and Rumlow have to regain their strength and their support.”

“I see no reason to believe they have strength or support left to gather,” Ross said. He was solidly red-faced now. “Especially in light of the path of destruction the lot of you have left across four continents—”

“—a series of successful fights, I think you mean, because each one resulted in the elimination of a Hydra base, significantly decreased casualties thanks to our involvement, and intel that reveals there are any number of others around the world, at least one of which houses highly volatile offrealm technology,” Darcy countered, eyes gleaming. She’d taken off her jacket at some point while Ross argued with Tony and Steve, and now she looked ready for a fight.

Ross stuttered for a half second. “Miss Lewis, you—what is she even doing here?” he snapped, glaring at Tony. “You hired a twenty-four-year-old with a BA in political science, of all things, for your PR department, which is your problem, but using her as press liaison as the Avengers—”

“Excuse you,” Darcy said. “Resorting to ad hominem now? That’s kind of sad. No one uses me, and I happen to like this job.”

“And she’s good at it,” Steve added. “Or she wouldn’t still have it.”

Darcy shot him an appreciative look.

“Fine,” Ross said. “Your staffing decisions aren’t my problem. Questionable as they might be. What is my problem is that we don’t know who half you people are! That man down in Mexico who carried Mr. Barton to safety—he simply disappeared from all our video footage, slipped out of our facility, and all you’ve told us since is that his name is Liam Hillworth. Not to mention the presence of Romanoff in your Tower, Stark—if I wrote out a rap sheet for her, it’d go from here down to the White House bowling alley. And that mysterious man who always wears a mask?” He shook his head. “You’re off the rails, Captain. I would hope you would understand this, at least. The Avengers need oversight, and they need to register themselves as enhanced humans.”

“What, there’s a registry now?” Tony drawled.
Ross’ eyes gleamed with triumph. “It’s currently in the United Nations.”

Darcy stood up. “Tell me you’re joking.”

“Oh, but I wouldn’t dream of lying to you, Miss Lewis,” Ross said condescendingly.

“We literally have an entire series of movies dating back twenty years telling you why that is a terrible fucking idea,” Tony said. “Hello? There is no way you’ve missed all the X-Men films. Mayhem, societal splits, division between normal people and… and the enhanced?”

“It’s barely a step up from calling us mutants,” Steve said. He crossed his arms instead of clenching his fists. ‘I’m an ‘enhanced’ person myself, General, and I can tell you that’s not going to go over well. And what about all the ‘normal’ people who have extraordinary talents? Like Stark, or Sam Wilson, or—”

“The registry will require check-ins every six month that include location, health status, employment, and a plan for the next six months,” Ross said, ignoring him. “As well as a clear documentation of the abilities manifested by every enhanced person we meet.”

“This is ridiculous,” Darcy said.

“But it’s beside the point right now,” Steve said. He couldn’t quite keep his voice polite. “The biggest problem isn’t us, it’s you.”

“Me?” Ross said. His skin was rapidly passing red and veering into the realm of plum.

“The government doesn’t exactly have a good track record with us,” Steve said flatly. “Back in the forties, when the Tesseract dropped out of the plane, I was glad. I never wanted to see my government tempted by that power. Then you woke me up and there you were with unlimited power at your fingertips. Making weapons. Keeping secrets. I kept on with Fury because I thought he was at least trying to do right by this country and this world. Turns out he’s a plant for one of the biggest single threats to human rights and liberty in living memory. Forgive me if I’m not eager to tie myself to another government entity.”

“One driver in a crisis,” Darcy muttered.

Ross whirled on her. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he snarled. Vitriolic. There were purple patches on his cheeks. Steve was glad Ross was so angry; that meant he was doing what he wanted: standing for what he believed. Oversight was ridiculous. Foolish. He refused to let another lumbering, corrupt, bickering government committee to second-guess all his decisions and slow down everything he wanted to do.

Darcy shot Ross a sunny smile that didn’t touch her eyes. “Oh, nothing, just talking to myself.”

Ross’ nostrils flared. Darcy was really pushing his buttons, in a way Steve knew he never could. He was straightforward; his anger was probably obvious to everyone in the room. Darcy, though–she was wrapping herself in deceptions and Ross was not happy about it. Especially since she wasn’t even giving him anything to pick a fight with.

“Rogers—” Ross began.

“General,” Darcy interrupted. “When will the vote on this resolution be?”

Ross calmed somewhat. “Next February,” he said. “And it will pass, have no doubts about that. If you refuse to sign—if you ignore the accords and continue as you’re doing right now—you will be
considered criminal vigilantes, rogue agents. You will be arrested and tried by an international military court, and sentenced as your crimes dictate. Consider this your warning. The moment the UN ratifies those Accords, and the gathered nations’ representatives sign them, you’d better toe the line.”

Steve took a breath to tell Ross exactly what he thought of this idea.

“We’ll consider it,” Darcy said.

He snapped his head around to stare at her, incredulous.

Darcy shot him a glare. “No promises,” she continued. “But we’ll discuss this at the Tower. We appreciate the warning, General.”

“Darcy,” Steve protested. He wouldn’t sign that thing. The rest of the team were free to do as they wanted, of course, but he would not. Not least because it’d involve turning Bucky’s identity over to the UN, and he knew exactly how badly that would go.

Tony gripped his shoulder. His hand was deceptively strong, reminding Steve that the man was a scientist and an engineer and he built his own suits. “Steve. It’s better to have one hand on the wheel than no control at all.”

Darcy stood. “We’ll see ourselves out,” she said to Ross, and turned away, facing Steve and Tony with her back to the general. Please, she mouthed to Steve.

Then he got it. She didn’t want Ross to know how dead set against this program they were, to buy time.

Steve could work with that.

“No promises,” he repeated to Ross, and followed her out.

As soon as they were back on Tony’s private jet, he asked, “Darcy. Why did you tell him we’d consider it?”

She blinked at him. “To get breathing room so we can figure out what to do about this?”


“I pretty much agree with you,” Darcy said. They settled into seats around one of the tables as she continued. “I hate the idea of a committee overseeing our every move and I think our autonomy is the exact reason you’ve all been so successful.”

“Do you have a game plan?” Tony asked. “I’m thinking lobbyists, see if we can get the people on our side even if the politicians are crapping their pants with fear.”

Darcy frowned at him. “You’re on board with fighting this?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Tony said. “I said it to Ross. Taking orders, not really my style.”

Darcy watched him carefully. “We do have a lot of potential to… screw shit up.”

“Then we’ll fix our messes,” Tony said flatly. “I own a multibillion-dollar international corporation.
“We’ll handle it.”

“Why are you so sure I’m in on this?” Steve asked. He was curious. He wanted to know how well Darcy had him pegged.

“Besides your little display back there?” she said. “Ooh, Nutter Butters, hell yes. Steve, honestly, you’re pretty easy to read. You’ve got your principles and you stick to them. We, and especially you, have been screwed over by like government types enough times that you’re done trusting them.” Sharp intelligence shone in her eyes. Steve felt uncomfortable hearing her talk about his own nature so bluntly and remembered how he’d underestimated her when they first met. God help any idiot who does that and doesn’t correct their mistake.

“And you?” Tony asked.

Darcy smirked at him. “You said it best, Iron Man. I don’t like taking orders. Especially not when they come from moronic organizations like the UN. Let them keep sorting out squabbles over fishing rights or whatever that scuffle was in their session last month. There’s a reason Congress doesn’t control the military.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Steve said.

“Good point on going straight to constituents, Tony,” Darcy said. “We got a good welcome in that town in Brazil two weeks ago; they weren’t too fond of Hydra’s goons. Maybe start near the bases we’ve taken down, spread out, see if we can get a mobilized support base. I’ll start contacting media outlets. The US has the most clout, so mostly here. And I’ve made some friends in the White House and the UN in the last few months managing your asses, so maybe there’s some strings I can pull, I don’t know. And Sam’s got buddies in Defense and State. Tony, any old friends you can hit up?”

“Maybe,” Tony said. “Some of the big business players have serious pull. Not sure if any of them will get behind us, though, they don’t really have a direct reason to be grateful to us.”

“Other than taking down Hydra ,” Steve said.

“Well, yeah, duh,” Darcy said. “Hey, and Maria’s probably got people in the alphabet soup infogencies, we can promise to keep them in the loop on any intel we get if they back us in the US government to try and decrease support for this resolution.”

“I like it,” Tony said.

Steve nodded.

Darcy beamed at them, and her canny brilliance vanished as she stuffed a Nutter Butter in her mouth. “Awesome. Mkay, I need to use the bathroom. Don’t have too much fun without me. Wait, who am I kidding, I’m the life of the party.” She laughed at herself as she sashayed away.

“She’s scary,” Tony said with a grin.

Steve nodded. “Glad she’s on our side.”
“Sam! Throw me that!” Natasha called.

Sam paused in the middle of the common space and squinted up at her. Natasha was… hanging from the ceiling, half-hidden behind their Christmas tree.

“I’d ask how you got up there, but I’m pretty sure that’s classified information,” Sam said with a grin. Natasha spun herself around and smirked at him before sticking her head back into the tree.

“Just make it land in these upper branches,” she said, voice muffled.

Sam turned the package of zip ties in his hand, pulled back to throw it–

Only to have it plucked from his hand behind his back.

“Hey!” Sam protested, turning around. “Oh my God, of course it’s you. Give that back.”

Bucky Barnes stood there, grinning and tossing the pack of zip ties in one hand. “What did you say you need these for, Pauk?” he said loudly.

Natasha popped her head out of the tree. “Wha–ah. Zima, when you’re done tormenting Sam, I’d love to use those zip ties.”

“Oh–yeah, thanks for the help!” Sam shouted.

“No problem,” Natasha said cheerfully, already buried in the tree again. Sam didn’t know what she was doing in there and kind of didn’t want to know.

He turned back to Bucky and glared. “Come on, dude, fork ‘em over.”

Bucky’s grin just got wider.

“I liked it better when you didn’t talk,” Sam grumbled, but halfheartedly, and Bucky knew it.

“Here you go–whoops,” Bucky said, yanking the zip ties back right as Sam reached for them.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Fine, keep the damn zip ties,” he said. “You can deal with Loki when he doesn’t get them in the next five minutes.”

Bucky looked down. “Loki?”

Sam shrugged and started to walk away.

“Think fast,” Bucky said. Sam looked around and barely got his hands up in time to catch the flying pack of zip ties.

“Thanks,” Sam said with a grin. “JARVIS, let Clint know I’ve got the zip ties for him.”

“I will do so,” JARVIS said. Sam still wasn’t totally used to the disembodied voice and avoided talking to it (him?) when he could but it was absolutely worth it for the priceless look on Bucky’s
I hope you accidentally drink sour milk,” Bucky informed him, crossing his arm. The prosthesis was eerily realistic.

“That’s… weirdly specific, but okay,” Sam said. “Hey, Natasha, I got your zip ties.”

“Good, pass ’em up.”

Sam removed four from the package and threw it up to Natasha, careful to keep Bucky in his sights the whole time, but the Winter Soldier didn’t try anything and Sam handed off the zip ties and kept going up to the next floor without further incident.

He hadn’t been honest when he said he preferred the old quiet Bucky. The new one, who smiled and joked with Steve and joined in their pranks, was probably a re-emergence of a personality that had been systematically suppressed for years. Sam was glad he’d taken the time to reach out to Bucky, and then put him onto some online resources for vets who wouldn’t or couldn’t talk to a shrink about it, and he knew it was better for all of them this way. Even if real Bucky was hella irritating sometimes. Sam still needed to get payback for the itching powder he’d found in his socks a week and a half ago.

But they’d called a truce for Christmas Eve. So that would have to wait.

Clint was up on the residential floors, busy tying garlands to all the light fixtures with Steve’s help. “Little late for all this, don’t you think?” Sam asked.

“Maria said we’d never be able to do all this in the two hours she’s gonna be gone,” Clint said with a grin. “Hey, thanks for those. So we’re going to do it in one hour and then wrap everything in her room.”

“Ambitious,” Sam said. “And I thought we had a truce on the prank war?”

“I’m not thinking of it as a prank,” Clint said with satisfaction, tying off the last garland and jumping down off the ladder. “More like an extension of Christmas cheer. Come on, Steve, let’s go get the wrapping paper.”

“I put it in my room earlier,” Steve said. “Sam, you coming?”

“No he’s not, I need him,” Tony said, striding around the corner. Probably he thought he was too dignified to run. “Sam, come on, it’s crunch time.”

Tony latched onto Sam’s arm and started dragging him back toward the elevators.

“Guess not,” Sam called back to Steve and Clint. “Good luck on your not-a-prank—seriously, Tony, what are we doing?”

“Preparing a thing for Loki,” Tony said with a grin. “I can’t wrap worth a damn and Darcy said you did the group gift for Maria earlier and it looks good, so you’re helping.”

Sam looked around. You could never be sure Loki wasn’t lurking around a corner listening. He liked to do that, though at least Tony’s magic detector would tell them if Loki was creeping around invisible. “I thought Loki’s thing was digital.”

“Oh, it is,” Tony said. “This is a joke gift, we’ll give him the real one after. In here.”
They stepped into the elevator. “My lab,” Tony said.

“Right away, sir,” JARVIS said, and the elevator began to drop.

“Why is there a Christmas gift in your lab?” Sam asked suspiciously.

Tony grinned. “I had to fabricate it.”

“I’m concerned,” Sam muttered.

“Don’t worry, it doesn’t explode.”

“Is this going to lead to a repeat of the Sparkle Incident?” Sam asked.

“What, glittery hair didn’t suit me? No, don’t answer that, we both know it did.” Tony tapped the elevator door frame and led out into his private lab floor, which was, as usual, a chaotic mess of engineering projects.

The annoying thing was Tony was kind of right. Sparkly hair that shed glitter for almost three days had actually worked. Somehow. Loki and Darcy had smirked every time Tony left a room.

“Okay, where’s the… holy shit,” Sam said.

“You can applaud anytime,” Tony said with a straight face.

Sam picked up the ‘gift’. “This—are these real?”

“One hundred percent genuine,” Tony said with a grin. “Cost an arm and a leg, lemme tell you.”

Sam shook his head. “Dude, this is going to be hilarious, but don’t expect me to jump in if he turns you into something nasty.”

“He couldn’t do that,” Tony said confidently.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Darcy said, walking in with a grin. “But it’s a brilliant plan, love it.”

“No no, I don’t trust you,” Tony said suspiciously. “Out of my labs.”

“I’m wounded,” Darcy said, not sounding very wounded. “I’m not going to save your ass either, Tony.”

“Okay, where’s the wrapping paper?” Sam sighed.

“I knew I could count on you. Right here,” Tony said, pulling a roll of wrapping paper out from under the table. It was green and covered with little cartoon reindeer.

Darcy coughed out a laugh. “That’s cold.”

“Get wrapping, birdie boy,” Tony said. “Four hours until gift time.”
Chapter 113

Avengers Tower

December 2011

Bucky settled onto the sofa, hands occupied by a plate piled with food: glazed ham, stuffing, mashed potatoes, salad, gravy, and two biscuits. Across from him, Steve and Loki both had similarly overfull plates.

Maria barged into the common room. “Why is everything in my room gift-wrapped?” she snapped, but there was a smile fighting its way onto her face.

Clint looked up, swallowed hugely, and said “It’s an early Christmas gift.”

“You gave me… my furniture?” Maria asked, hands on her hips.

“You’re in trouble now, Katniss,” Darcy stage-whispered. Bucky choked on his potatoes and shot her a smile. She winked back.

“Stop comparing me to some wannabe archer in a book series!” Clint complained.

Steve, Sam, and Bruce were all laughing now. Bucky couldn’t bring himself to laugh like that, unrestrained and un-self-conscious, but he could and did smile openly.

Maria finally gave in, smiled, and headed for the food laid out across the counter. Tony had complained that it displaced his alcohol. “You’re helping me get rid of it,” she called over her shoulder.

“I’d expect nothing less,” Clint muttered.

Bucky tried the ham, and his eyes flew open. “Who cooked the ham?”

“That would be me,” Sam said. “Since I’m one of like three people in here who can cook without giving us all food poisoning.”

Damn it. “It’s really good,” Bucky said.

Sam grinned at him. “Aw, thanks, man. See, Tony, I told you he’d come around.”

“You haven’t won that bet, he still doesn’t act like he likes you,” Tony said, throwing himself down between Jane and Bruce.

Bucky paused. “Wait. You’re betting on…”

“On whether you’ll ever quit disliking birdie boy, yeah,” Tony said. “Good dinner, guys, I’m full.”

“I’m not sure how annoyed I should be by this,” Bucky muttered.

Pauk patted his shoulder. When Bucky looked over at her, she seemed to be swallowing a laugh. “It means they like you, Zima,” she assured him.

Bucky looked down at his lap, and the unbelievably realistic prosthesis sitting next to his real right hand. The replacement arm was every bit as strong as his old prosthesis, and flexible; it was even
more sensitive and agile, especially when it came to fine motor skills. Tony and Bruce had done this. The Avengers had taken him in when it would mean their asses if he were ever discovered. Natasha wasn’t so big a problem, but harboring a wanted criminal—yeah, he knew they liked him. No one would’ve done this much just out of a favor to Steve. Bucky knew perfectly well that Steve wasn’t the only person with clout when it came to the team’s decisions. His eyes slid toward Darcy, unbidden, and then Tony. Even Clint, mostly because everyone liked the archer and respected his instincts.

“How, I know,” he said quietly.

Natasha smiled and rested her head on his shoulder while he finished the last of his meal. Her plate was already clean. Bucky let his full stomach work on his food and the conversation of the others wash over his ears.

“Mkay, dessert before or after presents?” Darcy said, leaning forward and clasping her hands between her legs. There was a wicked gleam in her eyes.

“After,” Tony said, sitting up. “Definitely after.”

Loki, who had mostly stayed quiet in his seat next to Bruce, looked between Darcy and Tony with narrowed eyes. “I find myself suspicious of your eagerness.”

“Me too,” Steve said. “But we might as well get it over with.” He and Loki were sitting closest to the tree; Steve leaned down and grabbed a tall gift mostly hidden under the bottom branches. “Hand this to Bruce?” he said, passing the gift to Loki over the coffee table in the middle of their two sofas.

Loki accepted the gift and passed it to Bruce on his left.

Bruce looked at Tony on his other side. “Should I be worried?”

“Always, when you’re friends with Tony Stark,” Sam joked.

“Just open it,” Tony said.

“Okay, okay…” Bruce started picking neatly at the wrapping paper.

Bucky remembered Christmases from before the war. This one was a little different; they’d called a halt on all Avengers things for the day and just taken it for themselves. All the gifts were communal: everyone knew what everyone except themselves was getting, which he knew was unorthodox. Bucky also remembered thinking that you could tell a lot about a person based on how they unwrapped their gifts. Bruce was meticulous as he pulled the paper off a cutting-edge sound system with wireless soundproofed headphones. Darcy tore the paper heedlessly away from her gift—a beautiful hardbound set of history’s best political science, psychology, and strategy books—and Clint absolutely shredded the tissue paper surrounding his gift, which turned out to be a miniature tree that was apparently very rare. Bucky hadn’t really understood that gift, but Natasha and Maria had seemed to agree that it was a good idea, so everyone else went along with it.

Tony’s gift wasn’t wrapped; he simply flipped the catch on an elegant wooden case, lifted the lid, and stared. “This is—This is a bottle of Shackleton’s whiskey,” he said, stunned. “What the hell. I’ve been trying to get my hands on one of these for years.” He looked up. Shock and gratitude were such unusual expressions for Tony that his facial muscles didn’t seem quite able to cope. “How did you get this?”

“Trust me,” Bruce said darkly, “you don’t want to know.”
Bucky hadn’t been very involved in that plan, either, but he noticed Loki looking studiously innocent and Steve trying to hide a smile. Must’ve been quite an adventure.

“That’s about the best way to make sure I do want to know,” Tony informed Bruce.

“Story time later,” Steve said. “Next up is… Loki.” He pulled a gift from beneath the tree.

Loki blinked. “I… was not expecting… to participate in your Christmas,” he said slowly, accepting the tall wrapped package from Steve. Which was strange, actually, because Bucky was pretty sure Loki’s gift involved computers and not actual, tangible things around which you could put wrapping paper.

Tony sat forward. His eyes were fixed a little too eagerly on Loki for Bucky’s comfort. “You’ve helped us take out seven Hydra bases now,” he said. “Saved my life and Clint’s. Seems fair to give you a Christmas present after all that.”

“Nothing like life-or-death situations to make lifelong friends, right?” Sam said. He was also watching Loki pretty closely.

Loki glanced between them. He had to know something was up, if Bucky was noticing it too, but he didn’t say anything. Instead, the Asgardian’s eyes landed on Darcy, almost unconsciously. He looked away again just as quickly.

“Did you catch that?” Bucky whispered to Natasha in Russian.

“That look at our PR girl?”

“Yes.”

“They’ve been acting oddly for weeks,” Natasha observed.

Bucky nodded slowly as Loki began to unwrap his gift—every motion efficient and brisk—and noticed Darcy watching him and Maria with uncomfortable focus. He resisted the urge to shift positions. Did she know they’d been talking about her? She couldn’t have understood them.

Loki paused, wrapping paper half free of his present. “Stark,” he said, and then stopped, like he didn’t actually know what to say.

Tony was cackling. “Show them, show them—”

Shaking his head, Loki turned the package on his lap.

Bucky snorted out a laugh before he could help himself, but he wasn’t the only one. Darcy, Steve, Tony, and Jane were all cracking up, because Tony had somehow made a replica of Loki’s terrifying war helm, except the horns had been replaced with reindeer antlers.

“It’s perfect for you, Reindeer Games,” Tony said, grinning like an idiot.

For an instant, Bucky tensed, wondering whether Loki would react poorly. But then Loki looked up from the helm, at Tony, and said only, “You will not find yourself so amusing when you wake up with flippers in place of arms.”

“You can’t do that,” Tony said confidently.

Loki smiled evilly. “Are you sure?”
Tony paused. “Can you?”

“I suppose you will have to wait and see,” Loki said with a smirk, setting the modified helmet aside.

“Have fun with that, Tony,” Natasha said.

“Whale Man,” Sam added. “You’ll have to remake the suit, Tony.”

“Better be careful,” Tony said. “You helped me with this.”

“I did no such thing,” Sam said, raising his hands.

“You wrapped it!” Tony protested.

Sam grinned. “Prove it. I know there’s no cameras in your lab.”

“Darcy, back me up here,” Tony said.

“With what exactly?” Darcy blinked at him with an excessively innocent face.

“You all suck,” Tony said darkly.

Bucky grinned at Sam. “I’ll back you up, Stark. He definitely wrapped the gift.”

“What the–how would you know, you weren’t there!” Sam protested.

“Prove it,” Bucky challenged.

Everyone was laughing now.

“Yeah, yeah, gang up on the normal guy,” Sam muttered.

“What am I?” Clint protested. “Maria and I are normal.”

“Secret agent assassin people,” Sam said flatly. “I’m a soldier, nothing else.”

“A soldier who flies,” Clint said.

“And?” Sam said. “So do those jet jockeys in the Air Force, I just have a little less armor on.”

“Loki, you do have an actual gift,” Steve cut in, still smiling. “Does anyone…”

“The envelope,” Darcy said. “There–no, there, by the big blue one–”

Steve found the envelope and passed it over to Loki.

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Is this going to explode in my face or some similar form of retribution?”

“I wrapped it,” Steve said. “So no.”

“Fair enough,” Loki said, and slid the envelope open. He removed the single sheet of paper from inside and read it with an inscrutable expression.

When he was done, he slowly looked up. “I thank you,” he said quietly.

Tony shrugged. “Kind of hard to buy gifts for the guy who can pretty much have whatever he wants. We went with something D–we thought would interest you.”
“No way that slip was an accident,” Natasha whispered.

Bucky nodded slightly.

Darcy rubbed two fingers together, the only sign of restlessness, and leaned forward. “Come on, guys, let’s finish this, I want pie.”

“Maria?” Steve said, tossing her a small package. Maria’s eyes drifted upwards as she caught the small box.

“What’s in here, cotton balls?” she asked.

Tony grinned. “Open it.”

Maria eyed him. “I don’t trust you.”

“Smart woman,” Clint said. “But it’s fine. I wrapped this one.”

“That’s why it’s so ugly, then,” Maria said with a small smile, and Clint swatted her on the shoulder while the group laughed.

Maria untied the ribbon and lifted the lid of the box. Inside, Bucky knew, she’d see two pieces of paper sitting on top of a pad that was in there to provide bulk. Her eyes flew open.

“These tickets sold out almost a year ago,” she said. “This symphony’s performance is one of the most expensive and sought-after in the world. I—how did this happen?”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” Tony asked, raising his glass in her direction.

“Says the man who couldn’t even get his hands on a bottle of whiskey,” Darcy said.

“Like you could,” Tony retorted.

Darcy laughed. “Who says I wasn’t involved?”

Tony looked around. Steve raised his hands. “I won’t confess to anyone,” he said.

“Ride or die,” Clint added, a reference Bucky didn’t totally understand but got the gist of as they all started laughing at the look on Tony’s face.

Bucky had known about, or been involved in, all the gift choices except his own, which turned out to be a book that promised to cover the last one hundred years of history in the most hilarious way possible. Steve’s he’d helped choose: a nice, heavy sketch pad and a set of drawing pencils. Tony told Steve it was so he didn’t have to doodle on receipts and napkins anymore. Steve responded by drawing Tony drunk dancing on a table, which had apparently happened at some point before Bucky was a part of the team and got a laugh from everyone. Then Jane pulled the paper off of a package promising three months’ unlimited lab space at someplace called CERN whose purpose Bucky still didn’t understand even though Tony and Bruce had both tried to explain, scheduled three years into the future because the lab was so popular. She shouted with excitement and would’ve run off to call her friend Selvig if Darcy hadn’t bribed her to stay with the promise of extra pie.

Then there was Natasha. Steve and Bucky and Clint had worked together on this one, then asked Tony to design and make something that would do what they imagined. The result was a pair of fashionable glasses that could darken to sunglasses at the touch of a tiny hidden button and worked
on an integrated overlay system much like Tony’s helmet HUD, undetectable to anyone else. Tony
said he wanted to fine-tune the design and then start selling them, but Natasha had the first pair, and
she slid them on immediately and promptly informed the room that they highlighted Steve, Bucky,
and Clint as the most immediate threats, much to Tony’s irritation.

Bucky remembered that when Steve had told them that Sam had been in a band before joining the
army and was a pretty good guitar player, he’d laughed, thinking it was a joke. It wasn’t. Sam
unwrapped a ten-string electric guitar with a bunch of attached speaker things Bucky didn’t
recognize and promptly launched into a rendition of a song called *Hall of Fame* that was pretty damn
good. Darcy and Jane sang along at the top of their lungs (neither Bucky nor Natasha missed the
way Loki watched her belt it out with no self-consciousness at all) and even Tony joined it at the
end. They were tipsy and goofy and Bucky found himself laughing like he couldn’t remember
laughing since… since before he was the Winter Soldier.

When they wound down, Sam still sitting in the corner strumming chords and running his hands over
his new guitar, Darcy and Jane and Steve went to dish up pie and ice cream and Bucky realized… he
was remembering something.

Something from when he was with Hydra.

It was a mission, and for some reason he thought it was in the mid-nineties, though he couldn’t have
been sure. He’d killed someone in the man’s home and he was on his way out when he passed a
family having Christmas dinner. A big family, not just parents and kids but aunts and uncles and
cousins and grandparents, three or four generations packed in around the table. He could hear them
through the window, their laughter and carelessness, and he remembered being amazed that they had
no idea how vulnerable they were. How easily they could die. He’d been… sad, or wistful, or
something, that he couldn’t have that. Hell, he’d missed that it was Christmas until he left the safe
house and started his nighttime journey through streets lit up with red and green. They’d wiped him
again that night, and the memory of that pain was what brought Bucky back to the present.

Only Natasha had noticed him check out. She laid a hand on his arm. “Hey,” she said softly, then
switched to Russian. “*Are you okay?*”

“*Yeah,*” Bucky said, looking around the table, and then he offered her a small smile. “*I am now.*”

“*Good,*” she whispered, and kissed him lightly. He kissed her back, one of the quick soft kisses they
could afford now that they had a measure of safety and certainty to their lives, a kiss that said *I love
you and I’m here and you are worth everything* and also promised more when they were alone.

“*Pie-ai-ay-ay-ay!*” Darcy yodeled. Bucky looked up just in time to see her Frisbee-throw a silver
aluminum tin across the room. It veered crazily to the side and lodged in the Christmas tree, and then
she and Jane and Steve were putting a stack of plates and four pies and silverware and a massive tub
of vanilla ice cream. “Get it while it’s hot!”

“What kinds are they?” Bucky asked, leaning forward. He could smell the pie. His stomach growled,
even though he’d *just* eaten a massive dinner.

“That’s apple, that’s pumpkin, that’s mixed berry amazingness, and that’s chocolate cream,” Jane
said, pointing at all the pies in turn. She was definitely feeling her alcohol (and Bucky had only seen
her drink maybe three glasses of wine); her eyes were shining and her body language loose and free
in a way it usually wasn’t.

Bucky grabbed two plates and passed one to Natasha. “I’m having one of everything.”
“There’s an extra of every flavor in the oven still,” Steve said. “Eat as much as you want.”

“Nuh uh, you get to leave some for the rest of us,” Clint said, accepting a large slice of the chocolate cream pie from Maria. “If you want more dessert after there’s a bunch more ice cream in the freezer.”

“Which flavor is the best?” Loki asked, examining the pies critically.

Steve said “Apple” at the same time Tony said “Pumpkin” and Darcy told him “Mixed berry”.

Loki grinned. “I shall simply have to follow James’ example and take one of each.”

“Good choice,” Bucky informed him. It was still a little weird hearing his first name, but he was getting used to it. Loki and Jane and Tony and Sharon, when she dropped by the Tower, weren’t comfortable calling him Bucky, he guessed. So he was James to some of them and Bucky to others and Zima to Natasha, and getting used to using all his names. They were all his, after all. And all parts of him that he liked. No one had called him “Soldier” in a while.

The pie, as he’d anticipated, was great. Bucky ate five pieces and as many scoops of ice cream and somehow managed to dodge the ice-cream war that cropped up between Darcy, Jane, Tony, and Clint, mostly because Sam stayed out of it too and he’d definitely have aimed for Bucky. With his stomach so full, he felt a pleasant lethargy setting in, and wanted nothing more than to stay there, leaned back with his good arm around Natasha and a half a glass of mixed liquor in his left hand, listening to people he trusted laugh.

It was going on midnight when Loki sat forward. “If I may say something?” he asked.

Steve tossed a pillow at Tony, who was loudly arguing with Bruce about something. “Hey, Loki’s talking,” he said.

Bruce mimed zipping his lips. Tony opened his mouth and Darcy promptly reached around Jane with another pillow in her hand to smack him in the face with it. “Shush,” she said.

“Okay, okay, talk, Reindeer Games,” Tony said.

Loki glanced down at his hands then up at the group again. “I am grateful that you have seen fit to include me in the celebration of this holiday,” he said. “I did not expect such a welcome, and so I did not prepare any kind of gift, as is the tradition.”

“We don’t expect–” Steve began, but Loki raised a hand.

“I know you do not, but nevertheless, I would like to give you something.” Loki’s lips curved into a smile. “This may be somewhat disorienting for a few seconds, but I give you my word no harm will come to any of you, and it will only last a few minutes.”

Before any of them could say a word, he lifted both hands and spoke something Bucky couldn’t hear.

The world tilted. He blinked several times and gasped.

Somehow, between the space of one blink and the next, he’d gone from his seat in the common floor to what he knew, inexplicably, was the royal box at a theater in Vanaheim.

The gathering below made him catch his breath. Many of the figures below were humanoid, but just as many were not; he saw skin in shades of blue and violet and gold and orange and green, hair and feathers and fur, wings and scales and even what he thought was tentacles. Bucky swallowed a
hysterical laugh to think of the “little green men” his generation liked to think of as aliens.

He realized the rest of the team was sitting with him and turned to look.

They were arrayed along the balcony. Loki was nowhere in sight, and each one of them looked—not transparent, but also not fully there, somehow. They were like figures in a dream. When Bucky tried to talk, his mouth made no sound; his hand passed right through Natasha’s when they reached for each other. It was without a doubt the strangest thing he had ever experienced.

As one, the assembled musicians on the stage stood, drawing Bucky’s attention back to them. The instruments, like the people below, were strange and otherworldly. Some looked vaguely familiar and some were completely alien.

And then the music started, and all Bucky’s curiosity and nerves and shock were wiped away by wonder.

It was falling water and avalanches and birds flying. It was the feeling of gliding over ice on skates and the chatter of a gun in your arms. It was everything Bucky had ever felt, grief and fear and love and loss and terror and hope spelled out in music that made him want to close his eyes and forget himself.

Time vanished. He didn’t know how long he listened, only that he didn’t want it to end.

When the last note faded into silence, there was a pause, and then the theater erupted into sound, a steady, rhythmic indication of approval coming from many throats in practiced rhythm. It faded away as the room did, and Bucky blinked—

He was back on the penthouse floor, between Steve on his left and Natasha on his right.

Loki lowered his hands.

“That,” Steve began, and stopped. He didn’t seem to know what to say. Bucky looked over. His old friend had tears on his cheeks, and didn’t seem the slightest bit ashamed. So did, surprisingly, Jane and Clint.

Natasha looked up at him, speechless, eyes shining.

“What was that?” Bruce asked.

Loki smiled almost sadly. “The famed Royal Symphony of Vanaheim. The Vanir are well-known for their love of music, art, dancing, and good liquor. Asgardian parties are wild, rife with ale and warriors shouting challenges. The Vanir’s celebrations are just as wild, but in a different way; they spread a veneer of civilization over their gatherings. You have not truly attended a party until you have been hosted on Vanaheim.

“That performance was one I attended a century and a half ago. I simply restored the experience with seidr and shared the sensory memory with you,” Loki said.

“Thank you,” Darcy said softly. “That was… incredible.”

Bucky nodded.

“You are welcome,” Loki said, meeting Darcy’s eyes.

For a second the space between them was charged, as if with lightning, or magic.
Then Darcy looked away, and the brief moment was gone.

“Those two have some issues to sort through,” Natasha said quietly. Bucky nodded.

Darcy’s eyes flicked to them and then away.
Chapter 114

Avengers Tower

January 2012

Jane’s breath hissed between her teeth with every stride, legs hitting the pavement in a steady rhythm. *I Swear I Lived* played in her earbuds, a custom wireless set courtesy of Stark Industries. Cold winter air pulled sweat from her face. It was her fifth mile this morning, but Jane needed the time to unwind after almost nine straight hours in the lab with Helen Cho and Tony, trying to compare Helen’s (brilliant) research with Tony and Jane’s latest advances without giving away that their source of new tech was Loki. It was difficult, because Helen was whip-smart and lived to dissect everything.

They’d eventually parted with the intention of continuing their discussion later. Bruce loved Helen’s cellular regeneration technology and Tony was already using a modified version of it to help with fabrication of his projects. Helen had only been at SI for two weeks, and even though they were very careful about letting her into the upper levels of the Tower, she’d managed to befriend both Tony and Darcy.

Jane switched songs, to *Shut Up And Dance*, hoping the sweetness would calm her down a little.

She liked Helen. Really. Helen was a genius, she worked a very different field from Jane but still acted as a good sounding board, and Jane knew they had a lot of potential to make some really interesting headway if they combined what they knew.

If only Helen didn’t have to turn every single conversation into an interrogation.

As if on cue, Jane’s phone rang.

She slowed down, almost dropped it, muttered a curse, and finally got to the green button. “Hello?”

“Janey! Hey. How’s your run?”

“Darcy,” Jane said, “hi.” She slowed to a walk. “Good. Five miles down. Needed to… unwind a little.”

“Tony said you and Helen were getting a little heated there,” Darcy said.

Jane sighed. “You called to talk to me about this, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” Darcy said without hesitation. “Listen, I remember Helen from school and I’ve talked to her a fair bit in the last couple weeks, and she really wants to work with you.”

“She questions everything I say,” Jane protested. “Argues all the time—”

“She plays devil’s advocate, it helps her understand things better,” Darcy said. “And she asks questions because she wants to understand, not because she doesn’t trust you. Remember how you used to complain about the other grad students sucking at their jobs and having to go over all their work to make sure it was sound? I’d bet Tony’s suit Helen’s used to doing the same thing, and she doesn’t even realize how it comes across, because it’s habit for her to pick apart everything everyone else does in the lab. I’ve seen her do it to Tony, too.”
Jane paused for a long moment, absorbing Darcy’s torrent of words. She felt… kind of silly, afterward, for not realizing it. Of course Helen, working on actual research teams, sometimes with two dozen people, would be accustomed to compensating for them. Jane didn’t really have the same problem since she’d been on her own for years, or with Darcy, and more recently with Tony and Bruce.

“Those are excellent points,” she said finally.

“Yeah. I know. That’s why I called,” Darcy said, and Jane could practically hear her friend’s smug grin over the phone.

“Okay, enough about me,” Jane said. “If we’re doing people things, I’m going to cool out and ask you why you and Loki have been avoiding each other for two months.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Darcy said.

“Yes, you do,” Jane said. “If I’ve noticed, everyone else has too.” It had taken her a while, but she knew Darcy, and her friend had gone from spending a fair amount of time with Loki to not talking to or about him at all, even avoiding the lab if she knew he was going to be there.

Darcy sighed, short and sharp. “Fine. Yeah, a little. Remember Nice Guy who was an actual asshole and talked about golf the whole time?”

Jane winced. She’d actually thought the laid-back and easygoing Tommy Brace would be good for Darcy, but it hadn’t gone well. Listening to Darcy rant about it that night had been entertaining. “Yeah. Sorry…”

“Nah, it’s fine, not your fault he wasn’t for me,” Darcy said. “I’m sure some appropriately vapid woman will find him perfectly entertaining; he can make her that salmon he was going on about and they can watch PGA tournaments together. My point was… That night, before I went up to see you, I ran into Loki in the penthouse.”

“…Oh.”

“Yeah.” Darcy sighed again. “He was all… We talked about his childhood on Asgard, and Marya, and my dad and Lizzie—”

“Wait, you told him all that?” Jane asked, shocked. Darcy trusted Loki more than she’d thought. She never told anyone those parts of her past.

“He overheard when Ralph called me that afternoon,” Darcy said. “And Marya just… came up, I don’t know. I could’ve kept quiet, he gave me plenty of opportunity, I just… wanted to tell him.

“He was open, Jane. Real, genuine. And I… I really wanted to kiss him. But he’s immortal. It’s nine kinds of a terrible idea.”

Jane paused. “Thor mentioned something once,” she said quietly. “The Apples of Idunn. It makes it possible for Midgardians to… to be with Asgardians in the long term.”

Darcy sucked in a breath. “I—Loki’s never mentioned that.”

“Thor brought it up,” Jane said. “The day he—broke up with me, actually. You weren’t listening at that exact moment.”

“But if Loki’s never mentioned it…” Darcy murmured.
Jane shrugged. “I don’t know,” she said honestly. “You’re a lot better than I am with estimating motivations. I’m just saying—there’s a way.”

“I was right,” Darcy said softly. “He—he doesn’t want—me like that.”

Jane knew how hard it was for her friend to get the words out. To be this open with anyone. “Maybe he thinks you wouldn’t want him,” Jane suggested.

Darcy laughed. It sounded a bit choked. “He doesn’t exactly have self-esteem issues,” she said.

“Okay, okay,” Jane said.


Jane frowned. That didn’t sound good.

A quick, muffled argument sounded through the phone. Jane couldn’t make out any words. She glanced around—she was three blocks from the Tower—and started to jog.

“Uh. Jane,” Darcy said.

“That’s an ominous… tone,” Jane said.

“Helen’s been kidnapped,” Darcy said.
“Sir, Mr. Stark wishes that everyone join him urgently in the penthouse.”

Steve looked up when JARVIS spoke through the rooftop speakers. He was parked on the edge of the building sketching the Manhattan skyline. “What’s going on?” he asked, scrambling upright.

“Mr. Stark has found another Hydra base, and he believes it is where Helen Cho is held captive.”

“Tell him I’ll be right there,” Steve said, already jogging for the roof door.

“Very well, sir. I have taken the liberty of summoning the elevator for your use,” JARVIS said.

“Thanks.” Steve hauled the door open and sprinted the fifty feet to the elevator doors, sketchbook and pencils tucked in his left hand. He swung around the corner and into the elevator; JARVIS closed the doors and it began to descend.

When Steve stepped out into the penthouse, most of the team was already there. Bucky, Natasha, Tony, Bruce, Maria, Jane, Darcy, and Loki. He noticed that Darcy and Loki were still carefully not looking at each other, as they’d been doing for months (Steve didn’t want to go anywhere near that can of worms but thought he might have to if they didn’t sort things out soon) and dropped his sketchbook on a sofa. “What’s the news?” he asked.

Tony glanced at him, eyes electric. Steve knew how much getting revenge for his parents’ death meant to Tony. “I found this,” he said. “JARVIS has been helping me run topographical analyses and supply records to track down more Hydra bases. That’s where we found the nine we’ve taken down so far, but those were small fish. This is the daddy shark.” He waved a hand over the table and a 3D topographical map appeared in wireframe blue, hovering at Tony’s chest height. “This is Sokovia, in Eastern Europe. One of those little towns with a weird mix of interesting old buildings and that gray concrete Eastern Bloc aesthetic. And on a hill outside the town is a good-sized building that’s home to Herr Strucker, who’s one of the Hydra charmers we’ve been after this whole time. It’s the best bet I’ve seen for where the scepter might be hiding.”

“UN?” Steve asked.

Natasha shook her head. “After last time? They just got in the way, slowed us down, and almost got me killed second-guessing every decision.”

“I agree,” Tony said.

Steve frowned. They definitely made sense, but… “They give us legitimacy.”

“It’s not making much of a difference,” Tony said, glancing at Darcy.

She glanced at her StarkPad. “Things are finally dying down a bit but he has a point, the media’s not exactly been nice to us even with UN involvement.”

Steve glanced at Bruce. “What do you think?”

“Secretary Ross is heading up the UN commission to basically put us in a box,” Bruce said flatly.
“I’d as soon not work with them if it’s all the same.”

Steve looked around the rest of the table. Clint shrugged and Maria just said “What they said”, so he nodded. “Okay, so we won’t involve the UN, but I do think we should notify them when we’re in transit. When do we hit this thing?”

“Now,” Tony said.

“Um.”

“Why wait?” Bucky put in.

Steve glanced at his friend. They’d been slowly finding their way back to each other over the last few months of dinner in the Tower, firefights, and late-night board game marathons during which Tony and Darcy and Clint tried to catch them up on sixty years of pop culture. Bucky was just as animated as Tony, and it was infectious.

“Sure,” Steve said, flashing Bucky a quick smile. “Who’s coming?”

“Sam said not to bring him, we can’t get him from Montana, we don’t have time,” Tony said. “Helen’s in there.”

“I called Sharon,” Maria said. “She’s in Berlin with the CIA’s anti-terrorism task force as an independent contractor, but she said she can come.”

“Good,” Natasha said. “So we’re not actually down a person.” She stepped forward and spun the hologram. “I have an idea for an assault…”
Loki adjusted his modified “tac vest” with satisfaction. He’d used seidr and a few days working with Stark to combine his personal armor style with the Midgardian technology, though Stark had not allowed him to include much tribute to his own armor so as to maintain anonymity. Loki conceded to his point, which was was a good one, and simply slimmed down the entire design. He now had spell-reinforced black gauntlets protecting his arms and a sleeker vest, though he’d kept the combat pants, having found them useful.

He checked on the spell that altered his pigmentation from a study in contrasts (pale skin, black hair) to something more homologous (brown hair, bronze skin) and his facial structure to become more square-jawed and solid. It was the disguise he’d worn when he took Clint to the United Nations after the fight at the Sinaloa warehouse deteriorated, and today since they’d added Sharon to their company. The face of Liam Hillworth. His new Earth identity.

“Ready for this?” Natasha asked him.

Loki shot her a quick smile. “Indeed I am.”

“*He’s not hoping for the scepter back, is he?*” Loki heard Maria whisper to Clint. “*Because I’d have to say no.*”

“I can hear you, Miss Hill,” Loki said, raising his voice slightly without turning around. “And no, I am not. The scepter was a tool forced upon me by Thanos, and I suspect Mr. Stark will make better use of it than I ever could.”

Maria paused. “Okay,” she said.

Natasha smiled crookedly. “You’re going to creep people out, you know.”

“Don’t we all?” Loki asked drily.

“Terrifying,” James said, joining them. “Can you…” He glanced at Sharon in the cockpit and lowered his voice. “Check my disguise? Make sure it’ll stay?”

“Yes,” Loki turned his back to Sharon and retraced runes on James’ back, adding energy to them to maintain the illusion that changed his appearance from that of the notorious Winter Soldier/Bucky Barnes to an old acquaintance of Loki’s, one of the Alvar. It was simpler for him to use faces he knew than to create a new appearance, and no one on Midgard would ever have encountered this particular elf. “It will hold for another four hours. No more masks required.”

“As long as we have you around,” Maria said, sharp-eyed as she walked over and joined their group. Loki shrugged. “I have no intentions of going anywhere anytime soon,” he said.

“Hmm.” Maria eyed him, no longer hostile but not particularly friendly either. Loki pretended not to notice. He’d win this particular battle much sooner if he simply ignored Maria’s hesitation regarding him and proved his own worth.
And since when did you concern yourself with proving your worth to a batch of mortals? Loki thought, suddenly and darkly irritated with himself. He remembered offering his hand to Darcy in a dark room, remembered letting himself be vulnerable, remembered the way it felt as his heart beat in his throat and he didn’t know if he’d be rejected or what he’d do if she’d taken his hand. Accepted his silent, undefined offer.

He should not care about any of them.

They are an amusing distraction and nothing more, he told himself.

“We drop in five minutes,” Steve called back from his usual spot in the right side of the plane. “Everyone suit up if you’re not already.”

Clint ran a hand over the bow and quiver strapped to his back. Steve headed for the center of the plane, spoke a command; the floor parted to reveal a motorcycle there, ready to drop to the ground, facing the direction of flight.

“I can get you close,” Sharon called from the cockpit, “but satellite images were right, there’s nowhere to land.”

“Of course they were right,” Tony said. “I got them.”

Bruce shifted in his seat. “Should I…”

“You’re only here as backup,” Steve said flatly, climbing aboard his motorcycle. “If we call Code Green, do like we discussed, otherwise stay here.”

Bruce’s mouth twisted. “The world doesn’t need another introduction to the other guy, does it?”

“The world can go to hell,” Tony said, more sharply than Loki might have expected. “You don’t like transforming, so we don’t want it to happen unless there’s no better option.”

Bruce sighed. “I hate being useless.”

“Now isn’t really the time for an existential crisis,” Clint said, not unkindly.

“Fair point.” Bruce sat back, face shuttering again.

“Ready, Zima?” Natasha murmured.

Her ekennd brushed knuckles soon to be bloodied and split across her cheek and said something in Russian, the Midgardian language that Loki intended to learn once he had mastered English. He disliked relying on Allspeak, and languages were certainly fascinating. It would also permit him to eliminate the edge of an accent that was impossible to entirely eliminate from Allspeak without using seidr to twist the hearer’s perception, and he disliked relying on his seidr too much as well.

Clint elbowed Natasha. “Get a room, you two,” he said, grinning.

James grinned back. “I could kick you out of this one,” he said. “Might be a hell of a fall, though.”

Clint looked out the cockpit at the mountains around them, still dark with fading night. “Uh, no, I’ll pass.”

“Smart man,” Maria said, propping her elbow on his shoulder and glancing at Natasha. “You’ve trained him well.”
“I try,” Natasha said with a modest fake curtsey.

“So you’re gonna stop the bullets, right?” Clint asked Loki. “Like that one time when Bucky Bidiot here tried to put a dagger through your face.”

“It was one time,” Bucky protested.

“Dead is dead, Buck,” Steve called back to them from his motorcycle, sounding as if he were stifling a laugh.

“Eh, I’m still not sure death can take this guy,” Tony said, poking Loki in the stomach with an iron finger. “What’re you made of? Voodoo juice? The screams of the damned?”


“No blood here,” Tony said, tapping his own chest. Metal slapped on metal.

“Which is why you spent two hours getting those cuts sutured last month, right?” Clint asked innocently.

Tony glowered at him. “That’s different—”

“Incoming!” Sharon shouted.

The jet began to roll.

The world slowed.

Loki threw out his seidr in a net even as gravity lost its hold and he went flying across the interior of the jet. Four missiles, expertly hit to give Sharon almost no room to maneuver.

Grunts of pain, shouts, came from the team. His team.

They were shooting at his team.

Loki anchored himself in place, ignoring the way the jet shuddered around him. Someone’s body bounced off of him and he barely noticed, too busy throwing himself at those missiles. He had seconds at most before they detonated, and at least two of them were likely to hit their target. Sharon was a skilled pilot, but these missiles did not shake.

And they were warded.

Loki focused on the two most likely to strike the plan. No time for a clever picking-apart of his fellow mage’s spells. Best to save his strength from a brute-force attack. Work around.

He summoned fierce blasts of carefully aimed air currents, no more than two inches in diameter but moving with the velocity and momentum of a tornado. His seidr worked on the air, not the missiles, so the wards—

Did not react.

And all four missiles instantly took nosedives for the ground.

“You’re dropping in fifteen seconds!” Sharon shouted, no trace of hesitation in her order.

Loki helped Steve right his motorcycle and joined the others at the back of the plane. Natasha,
James, Clint, and Maria were all wearing parachute packs. Loki reached for one.

The plane dove.

“Now,” Steve said. He hit a button. The floor dropped away from his feet and the motorcycle went with it, engine already screaming.

Tony went through the gap without hesitation. Clint and Natasha jumped next, Maria and James behind them.

Loki stepped over to Bruce.

“Liam, go!” Sharon shouted.

He ignored her. “I believe that this may be a ‘Code Green,’” he said, voice soft. “I suggest you prepare yourself for that eventuality.”

Bruce nodded grimly and stood up.

Loki winked and vanished.

He reappeared in the middle of a firefight, five feet from Natasha and four corpses. In a blur of motion, he took the remaining two down. “Didn’t the plan involve stealth at one point?” he asked.

Natasha grinned at him. There was blood on her cheeks and something savage in her eyes. “They shot at our plane.”

He returned a smile that Volstagg said made him look like a wolf. “Let’s go take our penance, then.”

“I knew there was a reason I liked you,” Natasha said, and then they were off, sprinting through the trees. Snow crunched under his boots. On foot, they’d fallen behind the front lines, where Steve and Tony had pushed ahead on wheels or in the air.

Off to the left, Loki felt James and Maria keeping pace. Natasha and James could nearly match him for sheer speed; Maria did an impressive job staying with them. And to the right, there was Clint, ahead of them, firing with smooth efficiency. He detoured by his targets to retrieve arrows as he went; Loki commended him for the sensibility.

An explosion came from ahead.

Tony’s voice crackled over the comms. “Uh, guys, small problem.”


“There,” Loki murmured. Up ahead, an open-topped vehicle careened through the trees.

“Oh good, you found it,” Tony said. “Yeah, they have machine guns on that thing.”

Loki felt more than saw the bullets tearing toward them.

He threw a shield up in the air before them. The bullets stopped dead in the air.

“Thanks,” Natasha said, and kicked her speed up, sprinting at the truck that bore down on her. Loki concentrated, following slightly behind her, protecting both of them from the guns.
The shooter’s eyes were wide and terrified by the time Natasha leaped into the air and vaulted off the nose of the jeep into the space where the shooter and his companions waited.

Three more vehicles roared around a corner of the road, aimed for them, opened fire.

A quick scan told Loki that Clint had ranged ahead, picking off the guards that came for Steve up near the front. To the left, James and Maria had their own engagement to attend to. Tony was far ahead, near the fortress itself.

Mine, Loki thought, and blinked himself into the center of the road not fifty feet in front of the lead vehicle.

The driver’s eyes flew wide. The vehicle did not slow down.

Loki raised a hand and concentrated. The words of a spell spilled from his lips, guiding the working, as was prudent when doing anything particularly complex or strenuous, instead of relying solely on the will. His seidr reached out, searching for anything flammable.

The two vehicles in the rear exploded in gouts of flame.

Gunpowder munitions, Loki scoffed internally, and in the half second remaining, he spat out another command and jerked his right arm.

The earth responded, turning to liquid beneath the lead vehicle.

It churned itself to a halt five feet from Loki.

The driver raised a gun. The soldiers in the space on its roof scrambled back toward their triggers.

Loki teleported to the side of the vehicle. Toor the door open, tossed the driver straight into a tree, and sprang up to the roof compartment just as one of the three soldiers there drew a gun and fired three times point blank into Loki’s chest.

He snarled in rage and kicked the man in the stomach so hard he flew across the vehicle and slammed into the opposite railing with a crack. The second soldier couldn’t get his gun up in time; Loki carved through his throat with one of the slightly curved blades he’d found in the armory and used the body to absorb the impact as the third soldier tackled him. Loki got that man through the eye.

The first soldier slumped from the railing, back twisted in an unnatural angle. Loki saw that the man was still alive. Eyes sentient, terrified. Gasping for breath. Blood bubbled at his lips.

Punctured lung. He did not have long to live.

Loki threw the two corpses over the edge. Grabbed the man with the broken back and tossed him out as well. Thor would have granted the man the mercy of a swift end, but Loki was not known for being merciful.

A cursory examination revealed that the chest wounds were severe but not debilitating. He’d heal in a few minutes, and in the meantime, the pain was not so bad that he couldn’t function. He slid into the driver’s seat and examined the controls of the vehicle. Primitive, compared to those on Asgard, but certainly functional. And not too complicated. Loki hadn’t had much motivation to learn driving, but it couldn’t be that difficult. Gas, brake, steering.

Loki pressed his foot to the gas pedal. The vehicle leaped forward. He steered along the road, aiming
for Natasha’s vehicle, which was rocking on its foundations.

Something shuddered, and the vehicle left the ground, tipping perilously to the side.

A blur of black garments and red hair leaped from the side.

A heartbeat later, the vehicle exploded. It careened off the road and into a large tree.

Loki slammed on the brakes and twisted the steering wheel. Simple physics. His vehicle spun and came to a halt next to the burning shell of the one Natasha took down.

He grinned at her out the window. “Need a ride?”

“Appreciate the help,” she said with a return smile, and vaulted onto the roof.

Her voice came through the comms a second later. “Let’s find Steve.”
Chapter 117

Outside Sokovia

January 2012

Steve gunned the throttle, shot straight for the bunker.

The engine of his motorcycle whined higher and higher. He jinked left and right, passing trees with millimeters to spare, managing the throttle and brakes to stay upright. Blue energy fire ate into the soil by his tires. He felt one shot carve past his shoulder; the heat raised blisters on his skin.

“Ironside?” he got out. “Bunker?”

“Kinda busy,” Tony said. A distant explosion, followed by a curse, told Steve all he needed to know.

He took a half second to slap the controls and switch to the groupwide comms. “Code Green, Code Green; Bruce, there’s a bunch of– son of a –bunkers down here, we didn’t see them on the surveillance–”

“I’m dropping him in thirty seconds,” Sharon said.

“Good,” Steve grunted.

He twisted. A shot carved a bite out of a tree trunk. He was almost to the bunker.

Steve didn’t even know what he was going to do when he got there, except it was going to be violent.

A door popped open in the side. Four Hydra men poured out and leveled close-range guns at him.

Swear words poured through Steve’s head. He ducked behind his shield; bullets pinged off of it but he could feel them shuddering into the frame of his bike too.

Something croaked underneath him.

Just a little farther.

A massive impact rolled through the ground.

Thank God.

Steve opened the throttle up all the way, engine shrieking, dying. He pressed a small red button mostly hidden behind the brake handle, slung his shield over his back, and threw himself forward.

For a long second, his body arced over the ground, feet swinging overhead. The world spun.

Steve’s feet found the ground.

He planted them and gritted his teeth, every muscle straining as he used his mass and momentum to swing the motorcycle over his head. He let go at the apex of his swing and threw himself sideways, onto the ground. Bullets tore through the space his body had occupied a second before.
The bike slammed into the group of soldiers. Two of them dodged its impact, but then the self-destruct went off and it took out both of them as well as a pretty good chunk of the bunker.

The damn gun finally fell silent.

The Hulk’s roar echoed through the trees.

Steve smiled grimly, and then he realized he didn’t have a ride.

“Boss?”

“Widow,” he said, scanning the trees and ducking against the bunker. “Where are you?”

“Commandeered a Jeep. Got Magician with me, Shadow and Winter’ve got our left flank. We’re closing in. Hulk just landed?”

“Pull back!” Steve demanded. “They’ve got a ring of bunkers–you guys’re going to get shot–”

“Magician says he’s got it,” Natasha said.


“You got this?” Natasha asked, voice muffled.

Someone responded in the background.

“I’m coming to get you,” Natasha said.

“Deal.” Steve tossed a grenade into the hole in the side of the bunker and pressed himself flat to the ground. Shouting came from inside—so he hadn’t been alone—and then the explosion shook the concrete. Pieces of debris hit Steve’s back, but nothing major. They’d really made these things sturdier since the war.

An engine sounded in the trees, coming closer.

Steve ducked into the remains of the bunker, in case it wasn’t Natasha.

“Captain?” a voice called.

He poked his head around the edge of the bunker. The Jeep idled across the clearing, Natasha’s head sticking out its window.

“Did you drop by Starbucks on the way?” he asked, jogging over and vaulting into the passenger side.

Natasha rolled her eyes and gunned it. “Oh, look, you’re learning cultural references, very nice.”

A flash of light, like lightning but bluer, beamed through the trees for a fraction of a second. Steve flinched and Natasha’s grip on the wheel twitched. She corrected herself with a muttered curse.

“What did you say Magician wanted to do?” Steve asked, frowning. They were approaching the line of bunkers.

“I don’t know,” Natasha muttered.

An even bigger explosion rippled through the trees. Natasha sped up.
“Hawkeye’s down!” Maria shouted through comms. “Someone take out that bunker!”

There was an answering roar, and then the Hulk’s massive green body blasted through the trees, carving a path across the road. Natasha spun the wheel and followed in the trail he blazed through the forest.

Energy fire came from ahead. The Hulk blocked it, absorbed in his massive body. Ducked his head and snarled and sped up. Steve’s eyes widened a little—he never got used to this—as Bruce Banner’s alter ego charged straight into the bunker like it was made of clay.

“There,” Natasha said, pointing to her right.

Maria was crouched over Clint’s body, using a gun in each hand and two trees as cover to fend off a pack of soldiers on foot, bearing down on her. Natasha gunned the Jeep straight through two of them. Disguised Bucky appeared on Maria’s other side; he took out four more and sprinted off through the trees toward the compound.

“Irsonde, take out that fortress now,” Steve snapped. “Magician, get over here, we need evac.”

“I am occupied,” Loki said tightly. Screams echoed down his line of the comms but he didn’t even sound out of breath. “There are bunkers in a ring around this fortress. I assume you do not want the soldiers there to flank you?”

“Shit,” Bucky muttered.

“Language,” Steve said reflexively.

Natasha stared at him.

“I’ll drive Clint out,” Maria said. “Boss?”

“I need a better call sign,” Steve muttered, climbing down to help her boost Clint up into the passenger seat. Natasha slipped out of the driver’s spot and took off after Bucky.

“I’d rather have Boss than that stupid moniker you gave me the first time,” Tony said.

“I liked Goldilocks,” Sharon cut in. “Also, they have two jets.”

“You good?” Steve asked.

“Oh yeah, but they’ll be falling debris in a second. Remember to look up.”

Steve grinned. “Copy that.”

Maria climbed inside the Jeep. “Go get that fortress,” she said, and peeled out, spraying Steve with mud.

“Hold on,” Tony said. “Is no one going to mention the fact that Steve just said language?”

Steve sighed and took off through the snow. “I know. It just slipped out.”
Chapter 118

Outside Sokovia

January 2012

Bucky gunned down a soldier. Raised his rifle and spun behind a tree. Bullets and blue energy blasts bit the trees around him, then the ground. He calculated the angles, poked his rifle around his tree, and fired without looking. The bullets stopped.

He ducked out from his cover and ran, keeping low. Pauk was to his left somewhere; he knew her rough location and kept an eye out for anyone sneaking up on her, confident she’d be doing the same for him.

Bucky tore through a thicket and stopped, blinking.

The forest was gone. In two hundred open meters, he’d be at the front doors.

“Pauk,” he said tensely, “something’s not–”

There was a blur in his peripheral vision. He turned.

Not fast enough.

Something hit his legs, knocked them clean out from under him.

Bucky went down hard, the breath whooshing out of his chest.

“Zima!”

Bucky flipped over and crouched low to the ground.

“We’ve got an enhanced,” he growled. Angry.

The blur flickered to his right. There and gone.

Okay. So he couldn’t use his eyes. That meant–

Bucky closed his eyes and focused on his skin. His ears. The contact his hands and feet had with the ground. Every action had a reaction, no matter how subtle or quiet or quick–

There.

At the last second, he turned, keeping his center of balance low, and rammed both hands into a brutal upward blow.

He hit something. Hard. Bucky actually slid through the snow, carving foot-long gouges with his feet. There was a choked gasp and then whatever it was went flying.

Bucky turned and got a brief impression of a tall, skinny blond before the person was gone.

“Pauk. Let’s go,” he said. “Don’t rely on your eyes.”

“Copy,” she said, and then the redheaded figure of his lover and best friend burst from the trees to his left. She’d been aware enough to not go blundering out into the open like a damn fool. Bucky tore
after her. They needed to get inside, where the close quarters would get this guy’s speed advantage
down at least a little.

He wondered, briefly, where Loki was. What he was doing.

Something exploded in the mountains on the other side of the fortress, between it and the town.
Bucky decided Loki was doing fine on his own and ran harder.

He sensed the enhanced coming. “Pauk!” he shouted, throwing himself forward into a roll. The blur
changed direction, slowed long enough for Bucky to get a glimpse of a man with hateful eyes and a
pointed goatee— seriously, shave already—and then vanished.

Oh-kay. That’s… kind of weird. Bucky narrowed his eyes but picked himself up and kept running.

An engine roared behind him.

Bucky turned around. Steve was bearing down on him in yet another Jeep. “Get in!” his friend
shouted.

Bucky jumped onto the side as Steve slowed next to him.

They veered left, picked up Natasha, and drove the last fifty meters to the doors, ramming them with
a boom.

In the smoke and sudden quiet, Bucky climbed down off the truck. Natasha leaped off the other side.
They met in the rubble just as Steve kicked out the windshield and joined them in the entrance hall of
what was once a castle.

“Ironsider, please tell me you’ve got something,” Steve said.

“If by ‘something’ you mean Panda Express, no dice,” Tony said. “But if you mean a secret door,
then hell yeah I do. Mop up the baddies, I’ll handle this.”

Natasha snorted.

“Why is he like this?” Bucky grumbled.

“You knew Howard,” Steve reminded him.

Bucky paused. “Good point. I take it back. Tony could be a lot worse.”

A scrape of feet against stone.

Bucky and Natasha instantly switched back to soldier mode. Steve pressed himself flat against one
side of the base of the stairwell; they went to the other.

Steve and Bucky met each other’s eyes.

Three, two, one, Steve mouthed, and swung into the opening, shield up. Bucky got into position at
his back, rifle poking over Steve’s shoulder, and opened fire on the person he saw there. Two quick
bursts. They bounced off a glowing red energy field that appeared in midair. Behind it, a woman
with brown hair retreated, hands up and eyes burning, behind a door.

“Two enhanced,” Steve said. “Everyone be careful.”

Loki appeared at Steve’s side.
Bucky had a gun trained on him instantly.

Loki cast him a bored look. “The bunkers are taken care of.”

“What?” Bucky stared. One person, in so little time–

He remembered Loki dodging his knife with eerie speed, holding Steve in the middle of the jet, keeping Natasha and her bullets at bay. Yes. It was entirely possible.

“All of them?” Natasha asked.

Loki smirked.

“We have two enhanced in the field,” Steve said.

“One with either teleportation, time manipulation, or super speed,” Bucky said. “I’m leaning toward the last option. The other one… she did a shield like you, except red and glowy.”

“Hmmm,” Loki said, eyes gleaming as he looked up the stairs. “That suggests the scepter is indeed here, if Strucker has the energy to perform such experiments.”

“Ironside’s going after it,” Steve said.

Bucky didn’t like the expression that came over Loki’s face when the scepter came up.

He didn’t mention it, though, saying only “Then I suppose we are the cleaning crew?”

“Yes,” Steve said. “Magician, with me. You two, start here and work up. Careful about any lower levels; we don’t want to get trapped underground. And beware the enhanced. We’ll head to the top and work down.”

“Copy,” Natasha said. She glanced at Bucky and tilted her head, beckoning.

He followed her.

The fortress was easy to clear.

They found no subterranean levels, and it seemed that most of the soldiers had been thrown into the assault in the forest, leaving few inside to resist, based on the reports babbled in a mix of broken Russian and worse English when Natasha and Bucky questioned the soldiers they found. Most they killed and moved on. Some they simply disabled, unconscious or tied and gagged with broken limbs. Only two actually surrendered, and when Natasha had moved to kill them too, Bucky stopped her.

She shot him a curious look but didn’t question it, simply nailing them both in the head. They didn’t speak about it. Bucky knew that once upon a time he’d have helped her snap their necks without hesitation. But the memories of being Bucky Barnes were mingling with the time he’d spent as the Winter Soldier, changing him. He wasn’t the same as he’d been before the war, but neither was he the same man Natasha had spent all those years with, killing their way around the world.

So he could exercise mercy now. And at least Natasha didn’t seem annoyed by his new restraint.

He hoped he wouldn’t lose her.
Chapter 119

Hydra Fortress, Sokovia

January 2012

“Strucker,” Steve said.

Loki didn’t listen very closely. He sensed something off. A pulsing energy nearby that seemed somehow similar to that of the Tesseract or his scepter, albeit weaker. Pulsing like a heartbeat.

Somewhere Steve was still talking. Fighting. Loki let him deal with it, honing in on that strange power…

It shot toward him in a battering ram.

Nice try, he thought, swiping it away with a thought. It expended more seidr than he’d expected, but not too much. He was at the point where he’d have to be careful—nowhere near his limit, but at least within sight of it. At a point where he ought to ration his spells.

“Where are you,” he breathed, creeping forward.

A door slammed.

Loki almost ran toward it, but that would be foolish; this felt like an ambush. The power pulse was in the same direction, though, so he continued creeping forward, using seidr to mask his sound and scent, mind working furiously. It was possible that his rival mage (though this was not seidr he felt) could sense him as well. It was also possible that this foe was from another realm, not an enhanced Midgardian as Steve expected, which could change things significantly.

The power pulsed, faded. Not as if its source was leaving, but… dying down?

Pulling back.

Norns. Loki hurled strength into his wards and dropped flat to the floor. Two crude fists of sheer power slammed down the hallway over his head, right where he’d been standing. This mage lacked finesse, but not strength. Telekinesis, and… possibly telepathy of a sort as well.

There was a frozen pause.

“Impressive,” he said, twisting his voice so that it would come from everywhere and nowhere, and also sound slightly different from his own. A diversion while he crept forward. Keep the mage off guard. “You have some power. Yet you work for these fools?”

A pause.

“It is my own choice to work here,” an accented female voice said.

Loki tsk ed. “You could be so much more than this, you know,” he said. That one sentence she’d spoken was enough to find a way through these halls toward her; he backtraced its echo. “You need not chain yourself to their petty concerns.”

“We have shared interests,” she said.
“Ruling the world?” he said, allowing a mocking edge to creep into his voice.

Keep her talking.

She hesitated, but it seemed his fellow mage was hunting as well, for she did not flee, nor did she sound afraid. “Saving it.”

“Mmm,” he said. “My experience with Hydra has not been that they are the world-saving sort.”

“The Avengers are a threat,” she said baldly. “I have lost my parents to them already. I will not allow that to happen to anyone else.”

*Interesting.* “I did not know the Avengers were in the habit of killing civilians.”

He was mostly sure he knew where she was, but this conversation was… curious. Loki found himself wondering where it would go. Instead of using a verbal spell, he traced runes in the air before him, runes taught him by Frigga in his youth, runes that spoke of binding and restricting and holding in place.

“You speak as if you are not one of them,” she said. “A scavenger, feeding off the chaos in their wake?”

“I am the chaos,” Loki said with a private smile. “But I am not an Avenger.”

Another pause. “Who are you, then?”

“The Magician,” he said, smile growing. He had her.

“Pulling rabbits out of hats?”

He laughed coldly. “I like you.”

“I cannot say the same for you,” she responded. He felt her power churning: she was preparing something.

She would never get the chance to release it.

“That’s to be expected,” Loki said, and drew the last rune.

She choked as her power drained away. His binding would last until he broke the invisible runes, or until the energy he’d imbued them with ran out, which would be fifteen minutes at least.

He stepped around a corner, illusory face firmly in place, and smirked at the dark-haired young woman standing there with shock on her face. “We’ve only just met, after all.”

Her mouth worked for a few seconds.

Loki felt something battering at his binding, and his eyebrows rose. She was strong indeed.

“None of that,” he said, and flicked his fingers. The binding tightened fractionally, enough that she would feel it. Having a power as intricately tied to your being as hers, as his *seidr*—bindings were not always pleasant. His was mild and gentle, as far as bindings went, but it would do her well to remember her position. “I’m not going to hurt you. We wish only to speak.”

“You seem to like the sound of your own voice,” she said, and fire snapped in her eyes.
A fighter, this one. Loki cocked his head. “You are not afraid,” he mused. “I doubt you trust my word that you will come to no harm... which means you have someone coming for you, no? Someone you believe can best me.”

Something flickered in her face.

“Always pleasant to be correct,” he said. “Let’s see who comes to save you.”

Now there was genuine fear in her face, and Loki found himself somewhat pleased to see it. Making his enemies afraid was always enjoyable.

He spoke three spells, holding them with runes that would only be activated when someone crossed them, and mentally anchored them around this spot. The words would shape his intention; the runes would hold the power and form of the spells until it was necessary, and act as a trigger for them. Efficient, and using runes allowed for a minimum expenditure of energy.

“Now we wait,” he said, and leaned against the wall, his eyes on the young woman but his attention trained around them. The other enhanced—for he could tell from here that she was indeed mortal, or at least of Midgardian birth—had speed or time abilities. He or she would likely not be coming through the walls.

A flicker of tension touched her neck and shoulders. Others might not have noticed, but Loki was not just anyone, and he caught the fractional shift in posture.

So she could sense the other enhanced, but not Loki. She knew that the other one was coming.

She was going to scream. Warn them away.

He twisted his right wrist. Green light flared and though she exhaled with all the force of a good yell, no sound echoed through the room.

“Can’t have you warning our guest, can we?” Loki said conversationally.

He was not so calm as he sounded. She was powerful—enough to potentially be a challenger if he were occupied by other problems first, if he were at a weak point, perhaps drained by other threats. And the rest of his team would be nigh defenseless before her strange ability to manipulate her environment, even more so if her powers included telepathy as he suspected. If Hydra had made more like her—

He would handle it. He always did. He would sell his soul, resort to black magic and blood sacrifice, if that was what it took to bring Thanos down.

Loki realized he was getting too lost in his own dark thoughts, as happened sometimes, and that he probably looked completely terrifying, based on the young woman’s expression.

“Apologies,” he said. “My wrath is not for you.”

She managed to say, “Whoever it is for, I pity them.”

Loki gave her his wolf smile and did not answer.

His spell activated a second later.

Loki felt the tug on his power and turned.

At the end of the hall he’d come from, a young man was frozen midstride, shock coloring his face.
He moved as if through honey.

“Your gift is speed, then,” Loki said, strolling toward him. “Fascinating.” He undid his two other traps, one geared toward timewalking and one for teleportation, gathered the energy back up, and glanced behind him at the woman. “Don’t run,” he told her. “I have your power, after all. And your… Sibling?” He looked between them. It was there in the shape of their eyes and noses, in the fear and calculation and silent communication flowing between them.

“Twins,” the woman said after a pause.

Loki turned to the man. “We haven’t been introduced.”

The man opened his mouth in slow motion.

“Forgive me,” Loki said with a smirk, and gestured; the spell retreated from the man’s head only. “You were saying?”

“Go to hell,” the man spat.

“How predictable.” Loki let disdain touch his expressions and dragged the man along in his wake like a fish in a net as he made his way back up toward where he’d left Steve. He didn’t look back, behaving as if he was confident the woman would follow (because he was).

Sure enough, there were her footsteps, trailing along behind her brother.

Loki raised a hand to his earpiece; he’d deactivated its microphone while he took care of these two. “Boss.” He detested using Steve’s ‘callsign’–he was not Loki’s ‘boss’–but it was not worth causing friction. “I have the two enhanced.”

There was a pause. “Contained?”

“Very much so,” Loki responded.

Tony broke in. “Hey, good job, Magic Mike. We’re up on the top floor, in the labs. Our friends have been very busy. Got Winter and Widow up here too.”

“I shall join you shortly,” Loki said. “Goldilocks.”

“Hey!” Tony protested.

Loki shrugged, though they could not see him. “If you call me foolish nicknames, I will do the same for you.”

“My hair’s not even blond,” Tony muttered.

Loki resolved to spell him to wake up with hair like the sun as soon as they arrived back at the Tower. With enough energy in the runes to last at least a week.
Chapter 120

Hydra Fortress, Sokovia

January 2012

Natasha examined the cradle. “Is it just me, or is that thing…” She didn’t quite know the words, but there was a feeling, almost like a hand running over her back but in her mind instead, and it felt like her own thoughts but not. She shook her head. “It’s gotten stronger.”

“It shouldn’t have,” Tony said, looking annoyed and scanning the thing with his suit.

Steve shifted. “I can feel it.”

“So can I,” Tony said. He glanced around. “Helen will know. She wasn’t talking when I airlifted her out, but the cradle is definitely hers. This…” He gestured to the cradle, the silvery metal half-formed body inside, and the glowing yellow stone set in its forehead. “This is her work.”

“We can ask her later,” Steve said. “You’re sure she was fine?”

“Shaken,” Tony said. “But uninjured. I can’t wait to poke around what they were having her do once we get back to the tower.”

“And you’ve cleaned the… sensitive data and experiments?” Steve checked.

Tony shrugged. “Got all the data. Might’ve missed some of the experimentation they were doing downstairs.” He gestured toward the secret door and the underground lab it led to, filled with illicit Chitauri tech. Natasha had taken one look at the suspended corpse of the leviathan and come straight back upstairs. The PhD team at the UN could figure it out.

He stepped up to the suit, which was empty and stuck in sentry mode. It shifted, engulfed him, and reformed around his torso, the eye slits lighting up.

“How are you going to get that out of here?” Steve asked, pointing at the cradle.

Tony cocked his head, examining the stone exterior wall.

Zima stepped forward. “Hold on a sec~”

Tony raised both hands and blasted the wall.

Natasha ducked reflexively, one hand coming up to protect her head. Stone shards and burning bits of debris littered the floor, but the cradle was unharmed, and so were her teammates.

“See you out there,” Tony said, wrapped his arms around the cradle, and took off with a roar.

He was gone through the window before she could reply.

Steve rubbed his temples. “If I still got migraines, he would definitely give them to me,” he grumbled.

Zima snorted.

Feet sounded on the stairs down the hall. All three of them heard the approach at the same time, a
solid, swift tread that sounded like Loki and lighter feet following behind. Natasha wasn’t sure what they’d face–

But the sight that greeted her when Loki dragged their two prisoners through the door wasn’t what she expected.

“He’s floating,” Zima said.

“Yes, thank you for pointing out the obvious,” Loki said with glorious disdain.

The young man in question was hovering midair, arms and legs moving slowly as if through molasses, glaring at them all. The woman who followed him in was young and pretty, with deep-set dark eyes and wavy brown hair. Both of them were very Eastern European.

Steve stepped forward and nodded to both of them. “I’m Steve Rogers,” he said. “And I’m guessing you’ve been experimented on by Hydra?”

“We know who you are,” the man sneered.

“Do not assume them to be victims so quickly,” Loki said. “She insisted to me that they chose this. They volunteered.”

Natasha looked at them. “Is that true?”

The woman nodded, slowly.

“You chose to be… experimented on,” Zima said flatly. Natasha took one look at his face and wrapped her fingers around his. She knew he was thinking about the things he’d begun to whisper to her, haltingly, across the sheets in the middle of the night. The things he’d only recently begun to remember, the things Hydra and the KGB did to change him. Turn him into their weapon.

“We did.” The woman did not look afraid. Her gaze kept going to Loki, assessing. Natasha almost warned him and thought better of it; he’d be aware.

“Why would you do that?” Zima asked, the words tearing out of him.

Natasha shifted her grip, running her hand up from his palm to his bicep. “Zima.”

She’d had decades to come to terms with this, and never any memory loss. Zima’s demons were more recent. And less easily leashed, thanks to the amnesia.

“Because of you,” the man said coldly. “Because the Avengers are dangerous enemies. So we had to become dangerous as well.”

“I just–” Zima stopped, sucking in a hard breath. Both of the strangers looked slightly unnerved. Even through Loki’s illusion, Zima’s pain was evident.

“It’s not such a strange thing,” Steve said, meeting his old friend’s eyes. “They’re not the only people in this room who opted into something like this for the sake of their country.”

Both the enhanced paused, obviously not having thought of that before.

Zima looked down. “Sorry.”

“I know that’s not what you meant,” Steve said quietly.
“It is possible that the scepter played a role in convincing them to cooperate,” Loki said casually. “Given that it can maintain a low-level influence without causing the symptoms of a complete mental takeover.”

“How would you know?” Pietro sneered.

Natasha tensed. Loki had a Pandora’s box of issues that was really better left shut, and talking about his experiences with Thanos was a quick way to bust it open. But he only blinked at the man, disinterested.

“Could you tell us your names?” Steve asked.

The woman hesitated, but the man raised his chin. “Pietro Maximoff.”

“Pietro,” the woman hissed.

He glanced back at his sister. His head seemed the only thing capable of moving normally. “They’ll find us eventually,” he said. “Facial recognition. Computers.”

She sighed. “I am Wanda.”

“What do we do with them?” Natasha asked. Killing them would be easiest, but she suspected Steve and probably Tony wouldn’t want to alienate these two, so she wouldn’t mention it. That also seemed a little… harsh. Next best would be imprisonment or incarceration, but she didn’t want to ask Loki how long he could keep them pinned down in front of them and knew he wouldn’t answer honestly with them listening anyway.

“You could let us go,” Wanda said.

“And have you cause more problems?” Loki said, not moving from his position by the wall. “Unlikely.”

“I’m not handing them over to the UN,” Natasha said flatly.

“Don’t trust your allies anymore?” Pietro said.

“They’d experiment on you,” Natasha said. “Lock you in prison and never let you out. They’ve got some creepily clever little shits working for them and I’m sure they could find a way to bind your powers. I’ve been through that, albeit at someone else’s hands, and I’m never letting it happen to anyone else if I can help it.”

Both of them looked a little taken aback. Good. If killing them was off the table (she wasn’t sure that it was, actually, off the table, but better to be prepared) then best to have them questioning whether she really was an enemy. And it was true, she supposed. She didn’t want that fate for these two. They were kids, really. The Avengers shouldn’t be their enemies.

“What can they do?” Steve asked Loki.

Loki didn’t change his casual posture. “He is gifted with superhuman speed, moving faster than most people’s perception,” Loki said. “Hence the blur you described, Winter. I’d guess it comes from a drastically boosted metabolism, and that his mind can process at a much faster rate than normal people as well, or he would forever be slamming into trees. She has been granted a form of energy manipulation not unlike my own from the thing inside the scepter, allowing her an impressive range of telepathic and telekinetic abilities, if I’ve judged right, and I usually do. Am I missing anything?” he asked the twins with mock politeness.
“Nope,” Pietro said sarcastically. “You’ve got us all figured out.”

“If we put you down, can we trust you to come somewhere and talk this out?” Steve said. “We don’t have to be enemies. At least explain your grievance with us.”

“She said the Avengers killed their parents,” Loki said indifferently.

Steve blinked. “I… we what? Were they in Hydra?”

“Because we’ve killed a lot of people from Hydra,” Zima said darkly.

“No,” Wanda said, hatred visible in her face. “They were innocent. And it was not you, but your ally Stark, who was responsible.” She glanced at her brother. “We will not speak with him.”

Steve paused. “I’m… I would be interested in hearing your story,” he said, clearly choosing his words carefully. Natasha resisted the urge to roll her eyes; he was not good at diplomacy. “We can have a meeting without T- Stark there. I know… I understand what it’s like, to have a cause you believe in so much that you let people use you as a guinea pig to stop it,” he said quietly. “All three of us—" gesturing to include Natasha and Zima—“understand what it is to be a… made thing.”

“You are new to your abilities,” Loki said, focused on Wanda. “You have a great deal of potential, Miss Maximoff, but little finesse. I can teach you how to hone your power, and manage it, so that you no longer struggle for control.”

Wanda took those words like a punch to the gut.

“Back off her,” Pietro said savagely.

Loki’s expression didn’t change. “I was once in a similar position to your sister,” he told Pietro. “Cursed with more strength than I knew what to do with. I have since learned how to manage what I can do, and now consider it a gift instead. I can help her.”

“We don’t want your help,” Pietro said.

Wanda looked up. “Pietro. Maybe we should.”

Their gazes met, and something passed between them.


“Show of good faith,” Natasha said quietly. “Tell us about Strucker.”

“I took him out,” Steve said. “The UN will want to try him.”

Natasha shook her head, still staring at Wanda. “No. Strucker’s at the top of this food chain, but everything we have suggests he wasn’t in Hydra’s upper echelons. Who told Strucker what to do, Wanda? Whose drum did he march to?”

She saw it on Loki’s face the moment he realized what she was getting at. He lifted his chin and gave her an appreciative glance. Natasha ignored it. She had a hunch. And a grudge.

Steve shifted. “You think—”

“Let her talk,” Natasha cut him off.

Wanda hesitated.
“You know something,” Natasha said, watching her closely.

“No,” Wanda said flatly.

The woman was the quieter of the two. More reserved, more controlled. So Natasha switched her focus to Pietro. “Tell me.”


Fury.

Natasha imagined, not for the first time, what it would be like to kill him. She wouldn’t shoot him. No, she wanted the intimacy of a knife. Wanted to look him in the eye and feel his blood on her hands as he died. She’d trusted him. Believed he was a good person, and that he could help her be one, too. Believed in his vision for the world.

But he’d betrayed them.

“Fury,” Steve said.

Wanda nodded slowly. “He was here two months ago,” she said quietly. Natasha saw no sign of a lie in her face. “Not for long. He seemed pleased with our progress. Strucker promised him to increase the amount of weapons manufactured here, and he left.”

Two months. We were only two months too slow.

“Thank you,” Steve said. “Magician, cut them loose.”

Loki studied Pietro, then Wanda. “I do not trust them,” he said.

Steve’s lips thinned. “They complied with Natasha’s request,” he said. “We’re just talking.”

“Rogers—”

“Release them,” Steve ordered, voice hard.

Something dark and wrathful gleamed in Loki’s eyes for a second. Natasha fought to keep her breath even and not reach for a gun.

“As you will,” Loki said, and that old fury vanished behind a mask of indifference.

Pietro fell to the floor.

Wanda hurled what looked like a red plasma ball at Loki, who—

Flinched. Actually flinched violently back, hitting the wall with a crack.

Pietro grabbed Wanda and was gone before Natasha could move.

Steve whirled on Loki. “You let them go!”

“First you are angry at me for wishing to keep them bound, and now you are angry for doing as you asked?” Loki asked, raising his eyebrows. He’d stood up and now he was deadly calm.

Steve stopped, mouth working.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t have a trap waiting for them to run,” Natasha said.
Loki’s eyes found hers. “I did,” he said coldly, “but the girl reached into my mind for a brief second. Blasted past my wards with a brute force attack. And I can now say with certainty that her abilities come from the scepter, because it felt precisely like the first time Thanos broke into my mind with that abomination, so forgive me if my spellwork was less than perfect.”

“Liam,” Steve said steadily, “back down.”

Loki blinked. Seemed to realize that he was no longer leaning on the wall but facing them, shoulders square, looming dangerously.

He let out a long breath. “I will meet you back on the jet,” he said, voice back to its usual cool evenness, and disappeared.

Steve rubbed his forehead. “That… could’ve gone better.”

“Twins probably won’t come back,” Zima said. “Not immediately. They know Magician can trap them.”

“So we just earned two powerful new enemies,” Steve muttered.

Natasha led the way out of the lab. “I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure we reached them, and Wanda definitely seemed interested by Loki’s offer. But we’ll definitely be seeing more of those two.”

“I wonder what Tony did,” Steve muttered.

Natasha pointed outside, where the jet was landing just outside the ruined front door of the compound. Bruce Banner walked up the ramp, naked; Sharon jogged down and wrapped a blanket around his shoulders. The Iron Man suit was visible just inside the back door. “Let’s go ask him.”
Loki was still keyed up on the post-battle adrenaline when Natasha, James, and Rogers–Steve–marched up the ramp.

“That’s everyone,” Stark called up to Sharon. “We can head out.”

“The UN?” she asked.

“On their way in to mop up. They’re not happy with us, but they’ll survive,” Stark said. His suit was stowed again, and he stood in only a sweat-damp black “tech shirt” and cargo pants by the screen in the middle of the jet. The cradle rested below it. “We should get out of here, or they’ll be all over us to talk to Loki and Barnes.”

“Tony…” Steve said, coming to a stop at his elbow.

Stark raised his eyebrows. “Steve.”

“Cut the act,” Steve snapped. “I know you were listening to us over comms. Why did those twins say you killed their parents?”

Tony sighed sharply. “I have no idea,” he said. “Although if they were Hydra people, I can’t say I’m very sorry.”

“They claimed they were innocents.” Steve looked worried. “Are you sure you don’t remember them?”

“Stark Industries used to make weapons,” Tony snapped. “I killed a lot of people by proxy, and even I can’t memorize that many names. So no, I’m not sure in the slightest that no one by the name of Maximoff never died because of an SI explosive.”


The ramp groaned and began to close.

“Taking off,” Sharon called back from the cockpit. “And we just got a message from Maria. She got Clint out, he’s going to be fine.”

“Thanks,” James responded when no one else said anything.

Tony turned to Loki. “Speaking of which, where are those twins?”

“They escaped,” Loki said coldly.
“What?” Tony demanded. “I heard you guys—you had them cold!”

“I was ordered to release them,” Loki said. He deliberately did not look at Steve as he said it. “Wanda Maximoff wields telepathic abilities that knocked me off guard long enough for her brother to carry her away.”

“Hmm.” Tony squinted at Loki, then Steve. “I get the feeling he’s not telling me everything.”

“He didn’t think they should be trusted,” Natasha said. “We didn’t listen.”

“I’m sorry I snapped at you,” Steve added.

Loki was surprised by the apology. And then gratified. But he showed neither, deigning to offer Steve a cool nod and nothing more.

“What, no gloating, Reindeer Games? I’m ashamed of you,” Tony said.

“A pity,” Loki said flatly.

“What the hell,” James said, pointing at a screen showing a camera view of the forest below.

Loki glanced over and saw that it was zooming in on a bunker. One of the three he had encased entirely in ice. His lips curled in a smirk at the sight. There had been seven operational bunkers beyond the slice of the protective ring that the Avengers assaulted. He had moved between them primarily on foot to save his seidr. Three others had simply been exploded in one way or other, but the seventh stood empty. The men inside had managed to catch him in the hip with a shot. He’d been irritated and taken a moment to transmute their blood to acid, dissolve them in a slow and painful death, and then vanish the bodies.

Steve looked at it, then up at Loki. “Your work?”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “I was perhaps a bit ostentatious.”

“That’s going to be hard to explain,” Steve muttered.

“I am sure you can make it work,” Loki said airily. He’d done them the courtesy of assuring that no bodies full of acid instead of blood appeared on autopsy reports; they could handle a bit of ice.

“We’ll figure it out,” Natasha said. “Get a rest, Loki.”

He almost told her that he did not need one, then realized that she was separating him from Steve to give them both an opportunity to relieve tension. “I will do so,” he said, dipping his head, and retreated to sit in the rear of the plane, across from Bruce.

The scientist was hunched forward, the heavy headphones from Christmas clamped firmly over his ears, eyes closed. Someone, probably Sharon or Stark, had bundled him into loose, warm clothes and a blanket.

Loki checked on Helen Cho, briefly—she appeared similarly bundled, and tucked into the copilot’s seat with Sharon, talking to someone on the phone. That woman was every bit as driven as Jane Foster.

He returned his attention to Bruce.

Empty protein bar wrappers littered the bench next to him, along with an empty jug of water. Loki could tell that transforming took a heavy toll on Bruce’s body afterward—left him in need of food,
water, sleep. Though his control over the Hulk was improving, Loki knew he was constantly on edge, always hyperaware of his own state of mind. Keeping the monster contained.

He wondered idly what it felt like.

Then Loki went cold, because he realized he knew exactly what it felt like.

He and Bruce had some… similarities. And perhaps they ought to discuss them at some point. A monster hiding beneath both their skins–

But no. Ridiculous. The Jotnar were the outcasts of the Nine Realms. While the Muspellir, the fire giants, merely maintained a wary peace with Asgard, the Jotnar fought them. Invaded Midgard to conquer it. Slaughtered children, committed atrocities as they raged, turned back only when their leader, Laufey’s father Bergelmir, was slaughtered by Bor and fully two-thirds of their armies were destroyed. The Jotnar were the shadows in the dark, the threat wielded against Aesir and Vanir and Alvar children to get them to behave. Evil, reviled. Beastly. Loki had picked up on enough clues from Jane and Darcy to ascertain that Thor had spoken to them the Frost Giants’ role in Midgard’s ancient history, had told them of Loki’s birth people with all the hatred and disgust their atrocities warranted.

*I’ll hunt down the monsters and slay them all.*

Loki had almost done that. Almost destroyed a realm and a people—almost committed genocide—because he was so lost in rage and grief and shame. Because he’d felt some sick, twisted need to… to prove his allegiance to Asgard, to show Odin and Thor that he might be monstrous in appearance but he *was not one of them*.

Loki knew he would regret that wrathful, idiotic decision for as long as he lived.

A part of him didn’t understand how it was any different to destroy the Jotnar with the Bifrost in one moment as opposed to some great war. Genocide was genocide, whether it occurred in the span of ten minutes or ten years. But he also understood why Thor had been so angry—the horror of what Loki had planned to do would infuriate anyone with sense. Or without sense, in Thor’s case.

He’d gone centuries coping with Odin’s scorn, never knowing its source. Doing nothing but trying desperately to prove himself. A futile effort. He would never forgive Odin for the lies, for the favoritism, for his blindness and complacency on the throne. And while Loki knew Thor hadn’t lied, because he’d never been told the truth either, he was certain Thor would never get past their past… differences.

And the Avengers wouldn’t be hasty to re-form their alliance with Thor.

Loki tipped his head back with a sigh. Thor. Brother, then rival, then foster brother and enemy, now… still enemies. But it was more complicated than that.

He didn’t know how it would go down when next he saw the Thunderer, but he knew it would be ugly. Fighting, shouting, quite probably injuries given and received. Beyond that, though, Thor would never abdicate his claim to the throne of Asgard.

And Loki had no intention of stopping until he could sit there as himself.
Tony decided quickly that Jane was something bright and fiery. Sunlight, maybe. Bold and sharp. But Helen Cho was steel, cold and quick. She’d endured God only knew what at the hands of Hydra’s people, wouldn’t tell them exactly how she’d been persuaded to begin work on the body, but she was insistent that the body couldn’t be undone.

“It’s vibranium based,” she said, tracing her hand over the glass top. “They’ve been stockpiling it since the forties, when the Captain’s shield was so effective.” She nodded in Steve’s direction.

Steve took a breath, probably about to tell her that he didn’t go by that anymore, but thought better of it. Tony agreed. They’d come to trust Helen more than anyone else in the Tower who wasn’t actually an Avenger, but she still didn’t know their real secrets. Even now, Loki kept illusions over himself and Bucky, keeping them disguised as Liam Hillworth and Ryan Dessen. And Helen didn’t need to know exactly how precarious a line the Avengers were walking between vigilantism and turning into puppets of the UN. At Darcy’s last update, she hadn’t been optimistic about her chances of keeping the Avengers Accords from going to a vote.

Tony pushed those worries aside. He’d deal with them later; he and Darcy were meeting later. She’d promised to involve alcohol and ice cream. “And it’s going to be sentient.”

“Yes.” Helen looked down at her creation with unmistakable pride. “It’s… incredible. The vibranium is binding to the cells, and the power of that stone, whatever it is, is already integrating with the half-formed nervous tissue.”

Bruce frowned. “I don’t like this.”

“What’s wrong?” Steve asked.

Bruce bit his lip. “Well… Hydra clearly wanted whatever’s in that gem to have this body. We already know we can’t remove it without… consequences… so that leaves us two options: destroy the gem, or figure out how to change whatever’s in there so it ends up friendly to us.”

“You cannot destroy it.”

They all turned to look at Loki.

Every Avenger in the tower (which was all of them, plus Sharon, minus Sam and Clint) had gathered in Helen’s lab space to discuss what she’d made in the cradle while under Hydra’s mind control. She’d managed to break away when Hydra tried to drag her out and hid in the lab until Tony found her, and now she showed no sign of slowing down as a result of her ordeal. Loki, though—he’d been quiet and unobtrusive this whole time.

He straightened now, Liam’s features fixed firmly over his own. “If you attempt to destroy the gem, the resulting energy blast would quite likely annihilate this planet, and quite possibly your entire solar system.”
For a second, Tony was speechless.

“What is it?” Jane asked, stepping closer to peer down into the cradle.

“And how do you know that?” Helen asked sharply.

“As best I can explain…” Loki hesitated. “When the universe was born, vast amounts of energy and matter were in constant flux. Your name is… black holes, I believe, for the phenomenon that occurs when a large mass collapses in on itself and its gravitational pull increases exponentially.”

“Right,” Jane said, “but–”

“I’m not finished,” Loki said. “Obviously this is no black hole. There are six infinity stones in record on Asgard, each with a specific… focus of power. The Tesseract has power over space; it allowed Thanos to send his army here even though they originated a vast distance away. This is the mind stone.”

“But what is it?” Jane insisted.

“It is what happens when a mass of dark matter forms a black hole,” Loki said. “A singularity formed of the most mysterious substance in the cosmos, one even the scholars of the Alvar do not fully understand.”

Jane’s mouth worked, but no sound came out.

“Do not attempt to destroy it,” Loki said. “Do not even meddle if you are not entirely certain of your course. The Infinity Stones can be wielded, but with great risk, and never tamed.”

“That’s not possible,” Jane said flatly.

“Science is a language,” Loki told her, and Helen, and Tony, because all three of them were staring at him in shock. “Your species has spent several thousand years struggling to learn it. You presently have about half its alphabet; you’re reading children’s books and teaching yourself, slowly, the things you don’t know. To understand this, you would need to be able to read an epic.”

Tony rubbed his hands together. “Okay, so assuming we take this on faith, what do we do? I don’t want that thing just sitting in my basement.”

“This is the sixty-fifth floor, not your basement,” Helen told him flatly.

“This whole tower is my basement because it’s all beneath me,” Tony retorted.

Loki raised his hands. “I do not pretend to understand what is inside that stone, but if Dr. Cho is correct–”

“–and I am–”

“–then there is something sentient in that stone as well. And that is beyond the reaches of my knowledge.” Loki stepped back, evidently finished.

Tony frowned, mind already churning out possible courses of action, but Helen wasn’t finished with Loki. “How do you know all this?” she challenged, and looked around at the rest of the Avengers. “Who is this man and why do you all take his word so easily? He’s no scientist. I know everyone who works in that field, and if I don’t know them, then Jane does.”

Jane winced. “Helen–”
“No,” Helen told her. “I want answers.”

Shit. Shit shit shit. Tony wanted to slap himself. He should’ve seen this coming. Loki should’ve anticipated this, actually, before he started going off about Infinity Stones and dark matter black holes. At least he hadn’t said anything about Asgard, but it wouldn’t be much of a stretch to assume—

“You’re not from Earth.”

Loki didn’t flinch, but Steve shifted his weight, Jane looked away, and Tony realized that he himself had reacted, a slight tension to his face. He relaxed, but it was too late. Helen had seen and catalogued all their reactions, and she knew she was right.

“So Asgard, then,” she said.

This time, Loki blinked. A small reaction, but from him, it was the equivalent of a full-blown twitch. “What leads you to that conclusion?” he said. “Humanity has had contact with only one person from Asgard, and it certainly was not me.”

Technically not true, we had contact with you and you destroyed a small town in pursuit of your brother, Tony thought, but he knew better than to say it.

“You must think I’m an idiot,” Helen said. “The odds of finding other sentient life in the universe are miniscule. The odds that that life looked so incredibly similar to us? The odds that Thor could come here and pass as a normal human, albeit an abnormally tall and muscular one?” She shook her head. “Astronomically small. So when another person shows up here looking exactly like us, yes, I can deduce that you’re from Asgard as well, because the likelihood of finding another alien race that so closely resembles us are too small to be calculated.”

Jane looked mildly panicked. Darcy made calm down motions at her behind Helen’s back and stepped forward. “Yeah, he’s from Asgard,” she said. “And no one can know that.”

Helen shrugged. “Oh, don’t worry, I’ll keep your secret. I knew accepting Stark’s offer to work here would involve seeing some things about the Avengers that the world doesn’t need to know. It’s not a problem. Were you a scientist on Asgard?”

Loki lifted one shoulder. “Of a sort.”

“Why are you here?” Helen asked, head cocked.

“That has no bearing on what we need to accomplish here,” Loki said, giving her a smile that was all threat and no humor.

Tony looked up. “I have an idea.”

“Shoot,” Jane said.

Tony shook his head. “I need more time to figure it out. Uh. Bruce, Darcy, can you go make sure there’s a spot in my lab for this? We can move the cradle upstairs—I have some tech up there that you don’t on this floor,” he added, to Helen. Darcy would understand he wanted her to work with Bruce and sweep anything incriminating or secret into a cabinet or something upstairs. Like the remains of Bucky’s first prosthetic arm, which Tony was still studying.

“Sure,” Darcy said. “C’mon, Bruce.”

“Want some tea?” Bruce asked her, and then the door shut behind them.
“I need to scan it,” Tony said. “The gem. In detail. The rest of you can go… unwind, eat, whatever. I’ll let you know when we have something.”

Bucky shrugged. “I could use food.”

“All right, let’s clear out,” Natasha said. “We’ll leave you geeks to it.”

“I’ll have you know, geekery will save the world,” Tony retorted.

She shot him a smile and led the way out, the last of the group jostling along behind her.

“I’ll stay,” Jane said.

Tony shrugged. “Okay. Both of you can help me move it.”

Chapter End Notes

So, as you can probably tell, I'm writing a hodgepodge of Civil War and AoU events simultaneously. Twins aren't done, don't worry :)

Sorry my update schedule's been so weird lately; I went to BookCon this weekend and wasn't on my laptop for a few days. Should be more regular now. Also, I finished reading American Gods and Norse Mythology by Neil Gaiman; if anyone's interested in old gods and magic and/or the Norse legends specifically, I highly recommend both.
“What does this look like to you?” Tony said.

Bruce stared, jaw agape, at the hologram.

Jane and Helen lurked in the periphery. They’d seen this already, but Bruce had been sleeping for the first time in three days and no one wanted to wake him. Tony had even managed to resist gloating about the fact that his scan and JARVIS had figured out the nature of the gem first.

“Like… a brain,” Bruce said, awed.

“It’s thinking. Look at the neural networks—here, here….” Helen stepped forward, brushing her hand through the hologram where light fired along two pathways.

“Can it hear us?” Bruce asked.

“It has no sensory organs attached,” Helen said. “So no, not as far as we can tell.”

“What do we do now?” Bruce said.

Jane worried at the edges of her sleeves. “Hydra wanted that… that consciousness… to be in control of a highly advanced body made out of vibranium and powered by a ridiculously improbable source of energy. I’d rather not try to interface with it.”

Tony frowned. “We’d have to be completely offline. Isolate the network, separate everything from the Internet, Bluetooth, radio signals, any other form of communication. I could do it here. Might take me a couple of hours to disconnect everything.”

“Wait,” Bruce said. “Who says we have to interface at all?”

Tony stared at him. “Why wouldn’t we?”

“Well, for starters, we don’t know what this is,” Bruce said. “And on top of that, I think Jane put it pretty well. We’re doing Hydra’s job for them!”

“I think we should,” Jane said.

Bruce frowned. “But you said—”

“I meant that we’d have to be careful.” Jane shrugged, coming closer, eyes gleaming with reflected blue light. “But this could be revolutionary. We need to understand what this is—how there’s a consciousness inside that stone.”

“It’s too risky,” Bruce insisted.

Tony stepped forward, taking Bruce’s eyes off the simulated brain. “We use JARVIS,” he said. “Between the four of us, we can create heavy-duty digital shackles for this thing. Isolate the entire room completely. No tech that can move, nothing that sends or receives a signal unless it’s via wires. We can pull the plug anytime. But we can’t just let it sit there.”
“The cradle has completed the body,” Helen said, running a hand over her creation, sitting to the side. “But it requires a power surge to activate the connection, among other things. Right now it’s… in a coma, of sorts. We give it the power surge, the integration between the gem and the nervous tissue will be complete.”

Bruce shook his head. “And give it a body? No. It could take off if it’s not friendly.”

“Bruce,” Tony said, resting a hand on his friend’s shoulder. He didn’t even have words to explain how much this meant—there was a reason he wasn’t an English major—but he could try. “This is artificial intelligence. JARVIS is the best out there, and he took me seven years to perfect. This could be the next step. We need allies. Hydra’s just a temporary problem; we’ve got them scrambling and once we find Fury we’ll be in the clear. But we’ve got other problems. Other threats, bigger threats, and we need more allies to stop them. Or I’m afraid… I’m afraid we’ll lose.”

It was the most honest he’d ever been with Bruce, and Tony could see his words hit home. He couldn’t mention Thanos, not directly, since Helen still didn’t know that whole story, but the threat of space invasion sat in the back of Tony’s head 24/7. Whatever Hydra was making had to be powerful; it had been the main focus of that good-sized facility. He wanted it on the Avengers’ side.

Bruce took an unsteady breath. “And we can’t just… bury the body and the gem somewhere?”

“Someone would find it eventually,” Helen said. “Also, I made this. I don’t even care that Hydra forced me to do it. This is the culmination of my entire life’s work. I’m not going to bury it because you are too afraid to try and help me finish what I started.” She glared at them all. “I don’t ask for help often. Most of the time, everyone around me is too stupid to be of any use anyway. This is me admitting you have areas of expertise I don’t, and you’re as intelligent as I am, and I’m not going to take no for an answer.”

There was a beat of shocked silence.

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Have you been practicing that?”

To his surprise, it worked better than he could’ve expected. Helen relaxed a fraction, and a tiny smile appeared on her lips. “Little bit.”

Bruce nodded slowly. “Okay. Okay, we… I’ll help. But… what are we going to tell the others? Steve’ll never go for this.”

“We don’t,” Tony said flatly.

Bruce blinked. “Tony—”

“We don’t have time for a city hall meeting,” Tony said. Thanos is coming went unspoken. “We’ve got to take down Hydra now. This either works or it doesn’t, but either way, that thing’s not going anywhere but this room. They don’t need to know.”

Bruce was silent.

“Bruce,” Jane said quietly. “I think he’s right.”

Helen crossed her arms and stared Bruce down.

He bit his lip. And nodded.

“Fantastic,” Tony said. “All three of you go get food, and bring me some. Three hours and I’ll have
this room as isolated as you can get without going to Mars.”

“Don’t you want an extra set of hands?” Bruce asked.

Tony grinned at him. “I built this place. I know it better than my own face. I’ll be faster on my own.”

“Are you sure about that?” Helen asked. “You spend a fair amount of time looking in mirrors.”

Bruce snorted.

“Hilarious. Get out, all of you,” Tony said.

When the elevator closed on their heels, he said, “JARVIS, let everyone upstairs know Helen’s going to be there for a few hours. Loki and Bucky better get their asses up to their rooms.”

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS replied.

“Okay, and then get me a holo of every network connection in this room.”

Tony whistled when the overlay lit up blue, replacing the simulated brain. He had a lot of work to do.
Chapter 124

Paris, France

January 2012


Pietro walked in, drying his hands on a towel. “Practicing?”

Wanda nodded, focused on the bed. “I need the experience. More than ever now.”

“I don’t want to fight them,” Pietro said.

Wanda knew it. She’d been expecting this to come up. “Stark–”

“I do not forgive him,” Pietro said. “He is a danger, and must be stopped. But the others–the Black Widow, the Magician–”

“Liam.” Wanda said the name mostly to herself, remembering how it had felt when he tore her power away from her. Not painful, but–it was like staring at your arm, feeling it there, but unable to move it. Unable to do anything but watch someone hold a knife over her fingers and hope they didn’t bring it down. She’d sensed, somehow, that he could hurt her if he chose, though he made no threat to do so. And she’d seen in the soldiers’ minds how those bunkers looked, encased in ice. He was powerful–more so than she was.

She wanted to learn from him.

“Yes. Him.” Pietro watched her carefully. “They did not seem… so bad. Even Captain America.”

Wanda nodded. They hadn’t really… talked about it yet. Too busy escaping, then finding food, money, to get them here. She’d stolen something from Strucker's head before they left. Something she hadn’t told the Avengers when they questioned her and her brother.

“He wanted to trust us,” she said. “The Captain.”

“Stupid,” Pietro said with a grin. “I’m too fast for them.”


“Yes, but you did,” Pietro said. “They can’t hold us. We’ll be more careful next time.”

Wanda shook her head. “I can’t fight him. Liam. I felt him… briefly… when I touched his mind. He’s stronger than me. And… so angry.” She frowned. “I got the impression… that he has been controlled before. That he was remembering the touch of a foreign power on his mind, and that was what caught him off guard so badly. But I’ve never met him.”

“The scepter?” Pietro said. “They told us it was used as a mind-control tool when Loki invaded New York last year.”

Wanda looked up, eyes wide. “Of course. He must have been involved in that battle. Perhaps he was an Enhanced working with SHIELD, and Loki took control of him? He did the same with several of SHIELD’s people working on the Tesseract.”
“Or Loki had acolytes we never knew about,” Pietro added, “and the Magician came with him.”

Wanda nodded slowly, thinking about it. “So either the Avengers have an ally who has been kept secret all this time…”

“Or they are working with Loki,” Pietro finished, eyes hard. “Hopefully not the latter. I kind of liked the Widow.”

“We do not need another reason to hate them,” Wanda reminded him.

“Stark.” Pietro shrugged. “Maybe… Maybe they’re not all bad.”

Wanda pursed her lips. “Perhaps,” she admitted reluctantly. “But they cannot continue as they have. They’re too dangerous. Just proxies for those terrified sheeple running the world, and no one realizes they’re causing as much trouble as they stop.” Though, she had to admit, Natasha Romanoff had not been willing to turn them over to the United Nations, and the others had not disagreed.

Pietro grinned. “So let’s go find an ally.”

Wanda smiled back at him. Her brother’s emotions were hot. Quick to rise, just as quick to die. He didn’t hold grudges; his hate and anger and love burned bright for all to see.

Hers were quiet. Cold. Implacable. She was the unforgiving one. The hard one. And this next step had been her idea.

“He’ll be at the corner cafe down the block in twelve minutes,” she said, checking her watch. “To meet his contact. We must beat the contact there.”

Pietro grabbed a pair of running shoes. “Got it. I’ll lace up.”

They loitered casually on the corner.

Pietro was eating, as he often was. This time, it was a crepe from a street vendor, stuffed with Nutella and raspberries and bananas. It was a touristy area of Paris, and the man they’d come to meet had probably chosen it so any strange faces would go unnoticed. Pietro didn’t seem to care, since that meant plenty of streetside food-sellers to replenish his ridiculously high energy needs.

Wanda normally would’ve laughed at him for the Nutella smeared over his lips and chin—he’d forgotten to grab a fork and now refused to leave her alone long enough to go get one—but she was too busy reaching out all around her. Sifting through the minds of everyone on the block.

Two minutes left.

She could already feel their target in the cafe; he was just slightly early. But she really needed the man he was coming to meet, the Hydra operative assigned to this city. She needed to steal that man’s intel so she had a bargaining chip.

There.

Pietro knew she’d sensed something without her having to say it.

Wanda raised a hand to Pietro’s temple. Red light flared and she gave him the image of the man she needed.
“See you upstairs,” he said with a grin, and he was gone.

Wanda took a more leisurely pace, finding the door they needed, and glancing around to make sure no one was watching. With a twist of her fingers and a gleam of red, the lock snapped, and she pushed the door open. A second later, a blur of Pietro’s mind, accompanied by one other, passed her.

Wanda joined them two floors up, in a nook with an ice machine. She made sure no hotel staff were nearby and stepped into the small space with her brother and the Hydra man.

She didn’t like Hydra very much. They weren’t really any better than the Avengers, though at least Hydra did not try to convince everyone that they were saints. They believed in a world she didn’t particularly like, but they were a necessary evil. She and Pietro had worked with them because the Avengers were Hydra’s enemy as well as their own.

But Wanda had no qualms about reducing this man to a useless mess.

She raised her hands without a word. Dove into his mind.

It only took a few seconds. She flicked her fingers, breaking the connection, and slumped backwards.

Pietro caught her, worry etched in his face. “Wanda–”

“I’m fine,” she said, pushing him aside and straightening. “I’m fine.” She took a deep breath, recovering, then glared at the Hydra agent. “Despicable man.”


Wanda didn’t have words to explain why she’d been so weakened. It wasn’t the energy requirement—she’d done this before when Strucker tried to keep things from them at the fortress, simply took what she wanted to know from the minds of his underlings. They were all too terrified of her to say anything, or they thought they’d imagined it. But this man was… “He’s not a good person,” she said, fighting revulsion. Wishing she could erase these images from her head.

Pietro turned the force of his glare on the man.

“Please,” the Hydra agent said, cringing. “I’ll–I’ll give you anything–”

“Those were children,” Wanda snarled, voice like ice.

Pietro looked at her. “What–”

“Hydra recruited him via blackmail,” Wanda said. “Video and still footage of his… crimes.”

“Please,” the man begged.

Wanda reached out again.

This time she didn’t go into his mind. She just broke it.

When she was done, he was a limp, drooling figure collapsed in the corner, staring vacantly off into space.

Pietro frowned at him.

For a heart-stopping second, Wanda thought–
“Good,” Pietro said, and spat on him.

She followed her brother back down to ground level, relief washing over her in waves. She didn’t know why she’d thought, even for a second, that Pietro would fear her. Would run like so many of the Hydra people when they saw what she could do. Of course he wouldn’t fear her, wouldn’t hate her or judge her. That was what they gave to one another. Unconditional love.

“There,” Pietro said, nodding at the cafe.

Wanda saw him in the back of the cafe, sitting facing the door. Close to the kitchen exit, so he’d have an escape route.

“Kitchen,” she said.

Pietro nodded, and took off. He’d loop around the back and come in through the kitchen, probably snag some food on the way, and block their target’s back way out. They didn’t have time for Wanda to track him by mind in a city of millions of people.

Wanda pushed through the front door.

Their target looked up. Spotted her immediately. His eye widened, and he turned, as if to rise, then caught sight of Pietro casually leaning against the wall next to the door that led back into the kitchen. Her brother grinned at their target and waved.

It gave Wanda time to cross the cafe and slide into the booth across from her target. Pietro joined her a second later.

She met Nick Fury’s eyes across the table. “We need to talk.”
It ended up being four hours.

Bruce walked into the lab, carrying a few boxes of tea and a grocery bag full of the packaged food he and Tony preferred for long stints in the lab, and stared.

The entire place looked… gutted. But not. Piles of cables were jammed where none had been before; power outlets didn’t have plugs in them for the first time since he’d come here. Tony was on his stomach beneath a table at the back of the room.

“Uh,” Bruce said. “Tony?”

Tony flinched. A bang came from under the cabinet. “Shit! God dammit. Hold on.”

Bruce wanted to smile, but the magnitude of what they were about to do stopped it. “Are you… almost ready?”

“Yes,” Tony grunted. “Just–this last–got it.” He scrambled out from under the table. His fingers were gray with dust and dirt, and streaks of it marred his face and the front of his shirt. “Who knew you could get so dusty, I have six vacuuming bots buzzing around somewhere.”

“Uh. Spaces they can’t fit?” Bruce said.

“Must be,” Tony slapped his hands together, releasing a cloud of dust. “JARVIS, gimme that holo again.”

A blue line sketch of the room appeared in its center, where the holo of the brain had been earlier. “Every detectable external network connection has been eliminated,” JARVIS said. “All wireless communication capabilities have been disabled.”

“Did you just turn off wireless or–”

“Please,” Tony said, looking slightly insulted. “I disabled all of it via hardware. That thing’s not going anywhere but this room even if we figure out how to get an interface going.”

“And JARVIS?”

“I have collected my consciousness in this room and the server banks attached,” JARVIS said. “I no longer have access to any other network but the localized one Mr. Stark has built for this experiment.”

“Are we ready?” Helen asked, walking through the door on Jane’s heels.

“Now we are,” Tony said. He swiped the holo of the room and its network connections away and flicked his StarkPhone at the space where it had been. The simulation of the consciousness in the gem appeared again. This time, something similar, but drawn in orange with much harder lines, lit up next to it.

“JARVIS?” Jane asked.
“Yep.” Tony stepped closer, examining the differences between the two images. “This is the best artificial intelligence system in the world, compared to that thing.”

Helen shook her head. “This will revolutionize computer science.”

There was a pause.

“Let’s get going, then,” Tony said.

Bruce was exhausted.

Fourteen times. Fourteen times in twenty-nine hours was how many separate interfaces they’d tried to run, and the result was absolutely nothing.

Helen was slumped in the corner, her careful poise long since evaporated. It was the first time Bruce had ever seen her with a hair out of place. Jane was perched on a counter next to her; counterintuitively, Jane had only gotten more energetic as the hours dragged by, and was now bordering on manic. Her legs bounced and she chewed on her lip, watching the progress bar in the middle of the room, slowly filling at the top of Tony’s main screen.

This was Tony’s show now. Bruce and Helen had done the bioengineering part, and helped him get the formulae right, but in the end he knew JARVIS and artificial intelligence better than any of them. His fingers flew across the screen and through the interactive holo.

Seventy-three percent.

Eighty-one.

Ninety-two.

Ninety-seven—

The screen’s edges flared red, and the progress bar halted. Warning messages cascaded over the screen.

Helen sighed and dropped her face into her hands, the picture of exhaustion. Bruce slumped backwards, curling farther into his chair.

Only Tony didn’t seem discouraged. “The integration ratios are almost right,” he said. “I just need a few more tries—”

“Maybe we should come back in a few hours,” Helen said. “Sleep, eat, shower—”

“I recognize that you are trying to hint that I smell, but I do not care,” Tony informed her. “I am going to—”

The door hissed open.

Tony swiped everything away in a blink.

Loki walked in, disguised, and raised an eyebrow. “Have I interrupted something?”

“No,” Bruce said, at the same time as Jane said “Yes” and Tony shifted on his feet.
Loki’s other eyebrow joined the first, but he didn’t comment. “I have been dispatched to inform you that Clint will be fine,” he said. “He is being returned here so that the cradle can complete his treatment. Also, Darcy and Steve are wondering why they have not seen any of you for the last day.”

“We’re busy,” Tony said.

“Yes.” Loki looked around, clearly taking in the gutted room. “I see that.”

His eyes fell on the cradle and the gem inside it, sitting to the side with various sensors and wires hooked up to it.

Bruce tensed.

“Ah,” Loki said. “You are attempting to work with the stone.”

Tony caught Bruce’s eye. Worry. Determination. Bruce really hoped Tony didn’t pick a fight with Loki right now.

“Of course not,” Tony said. “We wouldn’t dream of doing that without consulting the rest of the team.”

“Mmm,” Loki said noncommittally. He glanced around one more time. “Of course. Forgive me for asking. I shall inform Steve that you do not wish to be disturbed, and that another cradle will be ready for Clint upon his return.”

“Thanks,” Jane said, when no one else answered.

“You are most welcome,” Loki said, turning to go.

He paused in the doorway and glanced back over his shoulder. “I do not know as much as you about the capabilities of your technology,” he said. “But I would suggest that trying to communicate with the consciousness in the mind stone with Midgardian technology would be akin to using stone tools to communicate with a computer. You need something more similar if you are to succeed.”

He vanished out the door.

Bruce glanced around at Helen, Jane, Tony. “Did he just… help us?”

“Oh yeah.” Tony was already moving, pulling up the respective simulations of JARVIS and the mind stone in the middle of the room, running analyses on both of them.

“Will he keep the secret?” Helen said, standing and joining Tony. Some of her vitality returned with this breath of fresh air.

“Secrets are kind of his specialty,” Jane muttered, glaring at the door.

Tony paused and looked at her. “What do you mean?”

Jane hesitated. “Now’s not the time.”

Tony shrugged and went back to work.

Bruce made a mental note to ask Jane about that later. Tony would get too caught up in this and forget.

“Look here,” Tony said, pointing at JARVIS, then the other consciousness. “Their matrices are…”
similar. Not the same, this one is more advanced, but closer at least.” He turned to the rest of them, eyes alight. “Lo–Liam was right. This could be what we need to make the interface work.”

Bruce studied the screen, frowning. This wasn’t his field, but he’d spent enough time working with Tony now that he could get the gist of what he wanted to do. “But if it goes wrong…”

“We could lose JARVIS,” Helen finished, arms crossed.

“Can you make a… backup JARVIS?” Bruce asked Tony.

Tony grimaced. “I tried. I designed him to be an evolving AI, did you know that? It’s what makes him so much more advanced than anything anyone else has ever done. But I haven’t figured out how to copy his algorithms without catastrophic code decay. I’ve got a few others, though. Friday. Pyro. JARVIS is the… smartest of them.” He looked at the orange simulation of JARVIS’ consciousness. “If we do this, it has to be him.”

Bruce rested a hand on Tony’s shoulder. He knew better than any of them that Tony had managed to form a friendship of some sort with the AI. And that even Tony didn’t fully understand his creation. JARVIS had learned and evolved beyond his source code, into something other than what he’d been created, and he blurred the line between human and machine.

“Do it,” Helen said. No compromise in her dark eyes.

Tony took a breath. “Okay.”

When he lifted his head, there was no grief there, only steely determination. “Okay. Let’s do this. Bruce, there were some flaws in the matrix we extrapolated last time, let’s fix that. Helen–”

They all jumped into action, reinvigorated. Bruce still wasn’t completely sure about this. But he thought Tony was right: they needed more allies. More firepower. And they couldn’t risk Hydra finding the cradle and slumbering gem inside, and finishing the job themselves.

“Okay,” Tony finally said. “Everyone hold on to your seats, I’m starting this sucker–for the 

It’s not exactly riveting to watch,” Bruce pointed out, as the progress bar slowly began to fill. Two percent. Five. “Just you standing there tapping away–”

“I am a masterful tapper–” Tony said.

“Oh yeah, Master Tapper, that can be your new call sign–”

Sparks exploded from the computer to Bruce’s left with a bang.

Tony flinched. “What the hell–”

Some kind of alert went off. Tony refocused on the screen. Jane and Helen ducked under a table. Bruce followed suit. Stay in control you’re fine you’re fine there’s no threat here–

“Fuck,” Tony hissed, and dove beneath a table.

The lights went out.

Sparks flew from various connection points around the room. The only light came from the windows, but Tony had dimmed those before they began. Most of the sparks were coming from the cradle.
Silence fell.

Tony slowly stood up. “Lights,” he said.

Nothing happened.

“Windows. Lighten.”

The window tint slowly retreated, and the last of the daylight poured in.

The damage wasn’t bad. Scorch marks and shorted wires, but from what Bruce could tell, most of the actual servers and hard drives were okay.

Tony got the simulation back up. “JARVIS?”

They all stared.

The consciousness… it was…

No longer blue or orange, but gold, and larger than it had been before. It still looked like a brain, like it was thinking, more like the mind stone than JARVIS, but its edges were sharper now. Somewhere in between the two.

“Can we interact?” Bruce asked.

“I can hear you, Dr. Banner.”

Bruce flinched. The voice, accented like JARVIS but… different, came from the speakers they’d rigged for him.

“JARVIS?” Tony asked hesitantly.

“I am not JARVIS. Nor am I… what I was.”

No, Bruce realized. The voice wasn’t coming… just from the speaker. But also from…

The cradle hissed open.

The body inside, dull silver and eerily blank-faced, sat up, examining all of them in turn with eyes that gleamed yellow-gold, the same shade as the mind stone in its forehead. “I am Vision.”

“Oh shit,” Helen breathed.
Darcy rubbed her forehead. “No, I– no, I can’t get you that! We’re not a lobbying group, dammit– Listen, Tomas, I know, but seriously. I’ll owe you a favor, okay? I can put in a word for you with the State Department, I know some people, but right now I don’t have the kind of pull that would get them to sign that trade agreement.”

“Then I can’t help you in the United Nations,” the man on the other end said coolly. “That is my offer.”

Darcy made a face at her reflection in the glass wall of her office. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Hold on.” Tomas paused. There was shuffling, then a click, then more shuffling, and a bang. “Okay. I’m on a secure line. I can tell you…” His voice dropped. “Whatever you’re doing, move quickly. They’re trying to rush the vote.”

“It was scheduled for March,” Darcy said.

“Your General Ross is pushing for February instead,” Tomas said.

“That’s what he told us last month.” Darcy exhaled sharply. “Thanks for the warning.” She hesitated. Tomas was on the staff of the French delegate to the UN; he wasn’t very high-level, but he could maybe pass on some intel about alliances. Darcy needed to cross-check from all her sources so she could judge what was true and what was misdirection. “Who’s backing us?”

“France will vote against,” Tomas said. “But we’re one of very few who plans on doing so. Wakanda is undecided; Brazil wants to support you as well. A few others, mostly where you’ve taken out Hydra bases. That’s as much as I know.”

Not true, but Darcy believed it was as much as he’d tell her, so she had to take it. “Okay. Thanks, Tomas. I owe you.”

“I’ll remember that,” he said, and hung up.

Darcy stared down at the phone in her hand. She had one more call to make.

She scrolled down through her contacts until she found the one she wanted. Sabina Prescott. She’d gotten the number thanks to Tony’s hacking.

Darcy selected it and put the phone to her ear, idly spinning her chair in slow circles.

“Sabina Prescott.”

“This is Darcy Lewis,” Darcy said.

There was a pause.

“Miss Lewis,” Prescott said slowly. “I was not expecting to hear from you… at the moment.”

“Because you’re the new Italian delegate to the UN and your predecessor told you the Avengers
aren’t exactly on good terms with you guys right now?”

Prescott took Darcy’s bluntness in stride. “Yes.”

“I figured.” Darcy tapped a pen against her lips. “That’s why I called. You’re a new player, Ms. Prescott, and I’m curious where Italy will stand when the United Nations vote on the Avengers Accords.”

“Do the Avengers plan on signing the Accords?” Prescott asked.

Darcy smiled. This woman was clever. “It’s no secret that we don’t particularly like the idea of being tied to the UN. I’m sure you understand why we are… reluctant… to trust another government agency.”


“I doubt it is,” Darcy admitted. “But Hydra’s not the only threat, is it? We are of the opinion that we’d just be slowed down if we were hooked up with a committee. Or put under the command of a general. Can you really see that working well? You’ve met Tony Stark.”

“Indeed I have,” Prescott said, humor coloring her voice. “Understand that I don’t make the decisions, Miss Lewis. I represent my country’s interests to the United Nations; I don’t decide where we stand.”

“But your opinion can sway your government one way or another,” Darcy countered.

“That it can.” Prescott paused. Darcy waited, knowing that silence was sometimes the most effective communication tool.

“As it happens,” Prescott said at last, “I agree with you that the Avengers are more effective as an independent entity. It would help if you would offer a show of good faith to the UN. I’ll… see what I can do.”

Yes. Darcy smiled triumphantly. She’d suspected Prescott would agree; the woman had been close to the whole mess at the Triskelion. She’d seen Natasha and Maria take it down, witnessed Nick Fury’s betrayal firsthand. “Your support is much appreciated,” she said. “I’ll see what I can do about that show of good faith.”

“Have a nice day, Miss Lewis,” Prescott said.

“You as well.”

The line went dead.

Darcy put the phone down. Steepled her fingers together and stared off into space, mentally shifting the pieces around. Prescott’s support changed things. Hopefully Tomas could get his ambassador to work on the British and German ambassadors; both of them were pretty dead set on signing the Accords but Darcy had sneaked in some references to arguments that could be used to gain support that Tomas should be smart enough to reuse. She didn’t even care if he got the credit for them; what mattered was keeping the Accords from being signed. Or at least delaying the vote another few months. If they could finish mopping up Hydra, get Fury, and turn over all the Hydra people they found, it should be a good enough gesture of we’ll-work-with-you to smooth some feathers.

“Darcy.”
Startled, she dropped her pen, swore, and looked up.

Loki stood in the door to her office, looking–almost hesitant.

Darcy grabbed her pen off the floor. “Yeah?”

“May I come in?”

“You’ve never asked before,” she said, kicking back her chair to give him room.

Loki slowly settled into the spare chair she kept off to the side. “I was not sure I would be welcome.”

“We’re friends,” Darcy said, knowing full well it wasn’t an answer.

Loki’s lips twisted. “I came to apologize,” he said quietly.

“Hold on, what?” Darcy snorted. “You, apologize? Should I like tape this moment or something? Because I’m pretty sure you don’t apologize.”

“No,” Loki said. “Not normally. I cannot recall the last time I spoke a genuine apology. But you have been avoiding me for some time now, and I apologize for being too forward.”

Shit. Darcy didn’t want to deal with this. Seeing him, hearing him sit there and apologize to her, because apparently she mattered enough for him to actually apologize–it reminded her why she’d been avoiding him in the first place.

I have feelings.

“Apology accepted,” she said, looking down, because she couldn’t tell him that he hadn’t been too forward at all. That her reasons were completely different.

But at least this would make it clear she didn’t want anything more than… than the weird friendship that had sprung up between them.

Loki shifted in his seat. “Are you going to continue ignoring me?”

Darcy snorted despite herself. “Nah. It’s been too quiet without being able to tease you.” She looked up and grinned.

Loki smiled.

“So how’s your crash course in all things Midgard coming?” she asked.

He relaxed slightly. “I am enjoying the course you purchased for me as a Christmas gift,” he said. “It’s been very interesting.”

“Awesome.” Darcy grinned. “I actually started hacking with something really similar, did I tell you that? I mean, I’m nowhere near as good as Tony or anything, it’s more like a hobby. But knowing how to talk computerese can be very useful.”

“To learn things you are not supposed to know?” Loki asked, eyes dancing.

“Exactly.”

“I had a question, actually,” Loki said. “About the origins of religion on Midgard.”
“I’m not very well educated in theology, but I might be able to help,” Darcy said. “I know some people, if you want to call and ask questions. You can pretend to be a friend of mine, fresh out of college.”

“I would appreciate that,” Loki said with a smile.

And Darcy felt herself falling back into his pull.

_Snap out of it_ , she thought furiously to herself, and looked away. “What’s the question?”

“I am curious about–”

Steve threw the door open, face set and furious. “You guys need to come downstairs. Right now. Loki, be Liam, disguise Bucky on the way down.”

“What is it?” Darcy asked, alarmed, already on her feet. Loki was there at her back, and she realized she was leaning into him the slightest bit, reassured by his presence. She stepped away.

Steve didn’t seem to have noticed. He was already walking away, across the penthouse. “Tony and Bruce and Helen woke up the thing in the cradle.”

“Oh fuck,” Darcy said, and hurried after him.
“What have you done?”

Tony didn’t back down even though Steve was shouting in his face. “What I had to.”

Steve was fuming. “You—you’re screwing with something you don’t understand, and you just—just went off on your own? We’re supposed to be a goddamn team, Tony!”

“We don’t have time to sit down and argue for two weeks,” Tony snapped.

Jane hated this. Hated that they were fighting. She wanted to step in and fix it but had no idea how.

Steve took a deep breath. Touched his temple. “I don’t even know what to say.”

“Then don’t say anything,” Tony said. “Seriously. It worked. We reconfigured JARVIS’ matrix and the thing in the gem to make… that.”

“Worked?” Steve said, and looked at the thing. “Is that what you think happened?”

It angled its head. Somehow, it had clothed itself in dark red and muted gold, like Tony’s suit in deep shadows. “Yes.”

Steve glared at Tony even as he stepped back. “And why do you sound like JARVIS?”

It moved forward, commanding everyone’s attention. Jane noticed that green light gleamed around Loki’s hands and Natasha and Bucky were both reaching for weapons. “Mr. Stark used his artificial intelligence system to create an interface with… what I was. JARVIS and the consciousness bound to the mind stone fused, and… I am what remains.”

“Hydra wanted to make you,” Steve said.

It looked at him with eyes both ancient and young. Jane felt a shiver go down her spine at the same time as she wanted to sit it down and cover it with electrodes. The way it moved—

“You think I am a child of Hydra.”

“Aren’t you?” Bruce asked. Jane could see his hands balled into a fist and stepped over to him, resting her palm lightly on his shoulder. She didn’t know if it was the right thing. She hoped so.

He relaxed a fraction.

“No,” it said quietly. “I am not of Hydra, nor am I his artificial intelligence. I am… I am.”

“The twins’ powers,” Loki said. “They come from that.” He pointed at the mind stone. “Hydra wanted to use it. But with it on our side—”

“Are you?” Steve asked it. “On our side.”

The thing closed its eyes.
Several very tense seconds passed.

Its eyes popped open. “Yes.”


The creature looked at him. “Anthony Stark. Genius, billionaire, philanthropist. Because you want a better world. You are human, all of you… except him…” It nodded at Loki. “Because you try to fix your mistakes. Because you oppose Hydra, and their vision for the world is—wrong.”

Steve blew out a long breath and rubbed a hand through his hair. “I… I don’t know what to say.”

“Then don’t say anything,” Helen advised, stepping forward and eyeing her creation with a critical eye. Jane wanted to congratulate her—this was an amazing accomplishment—but she was fairly sure Helen would only be irritated by the praise. “What are you? Do you have any abilities?”

In response, the creature slowly levitated off the ground. It looked down at itself. “I do not… I do not know, precisely. I suspect I shall discover my capabilities in time.”

“Better figure it out fast,” Natasha said. “Because we kind of have a covert war happening.”

“I have a ton of questions,” Helen said, and pulled out a StarkPad. “Start dictation. Were you conscious inside the gem? How old are you? What do you remember from before, as JARVIS or as the scepter?” Helen said, eyes sharp. “Where do you come from? Do you consider yourself conscious on the same level as humans or Asgardians? What are your intentions regarding the human race? I need you to sit down and answer some questions to establish a baseline for your sense of morality.”

“And the quantum physics of its movement,” Jane said to her, moving forward. This was fascinating. This was her and Helen at their best, working together, feeding off of each other. Helen nodded, typing as Jane spoke. “The levitation in particular. There’s no sound, so how does it work? And your body—the power source from the gem in particular, where does it come from? And—”

“What’s your name?”

Everyone looked at Darcy.

Jane felt momentarily pissed at herself for not thinking to ask that.

“I…” The creature looked lost for a moment.

“We can name you. If you like want one. I mean, we’re gonna name you if you don’t pick one, because this could get really awkward really fast if we’re always saying “mind stone creature” or whatever every time we need to talk to you or about you,” Darcy said.

Impossibly, the creature smiled faintly. The expression looked foreign on its smooth, distant face. “Ah, yes, I can imagine so.”

“Imagination,” Jane hissed to Helen. “It uses that concept.”

“And humor,” she whispered back, adding both notes to her tablet.

Darcy ignored them. “So. Names. Want one? Want to pick one? There’s tons of name generators online if you need—”

“Vision,” it said quietly. “Call me Vision.”
Darcy blinked. “That’s like nine levels of irony. Nice.”

“Vision it is,” Tony said, stepping forward with a sharp smile on his face.

“What do we tell the world?” Natasha asked.

Darcy and Tony both looked like they’d had cold water dumped on their heads, dousing some kind of fire. Jane really wanted to just drag Helen and maybe Bruce into a corner and discuss this, but she made herself sit still and listen. Darcy always said these kinds of things were important, and Jane knew she was right even though she herself didn’t want to deal with them.

“We could keep him secret,” Tony said.

“No,” Darcy said.

Tony raised a hand. “Easy, tiger, it was just a suggestion.”

“I talked to Sabina Prescott on the phone,” Darcy said. “The Avengers Accords are scheduled for a vote in March, but Ross is pushing for February and there’s not a whole lot of resistance. France is with us, Brazil too, and Prescott seemed to think she might be able to get Italy on board, but everyone else in support of our side are pretty impotent politically. Prescott said she could get more countries on board or even just delay the vote if we give them a show of good faith. Keeping him a secret would be an immediate–hold up, do you want us to call you he or she or it or what?” she asked.


“Oh–where was I?” Darcy asked.

“Show of good faith,” Loki murmured.

“Right, thanks. Keeping him secret would be the exact opposite of that,” Darcy finished, crossing her arms.

“But would introducing him imply we want to go along with that ridiculous registry?” Tony asked.

Steve frowned.

“I don’t think so,” Darcy said, thinking. “How about this. Press conference tomorrow. Tony, Helen, Bruce, and Jane–”

“I don’t want to be there,” Jane blurted. “This wasn’t really my project as much. I mean, I helped, but it’s not my area of expertise.”

Darcy shrugged. “That’s fine. So Tony, Helen, and Bruce can be there to talk about the science of it, and then we introduce Vision, and basically just tell people that Hydra was trying to wake him up a brainwashed superweapon and we managed to save him.”

Vision cocked his head and examined her. “That is not precisely what happened.”

“It’s technically true,” Darcy said. “You make your own decisions now. And we did wake you up with the hopes we could turn Hydra’s weapon against them, which happened. Do you think we should do anything different?”

Vision considered. “No. It is a clever idea.”
“Cool.” Darcy tapped her foot. “Oh, and people are totally gonna compare this situation to Frankenstein. Just saying. So be prepared for that.”

“Frankenstein?” Loki asked.

“It’s a book. Remind me to lend you a copy.” Darcy looked around. “Yes?”

“I say yeah,” Bucky, in his disguise, said.

“I agree.” Natasha took his hand.

Steve exhaled sharply. “Yes.”

“Same,” Tony said. “Good plan. Uh. Vision. Do you need sleep?”

“I do not think so,” Vision said. “At any rate, I do not feel as though I need to rest at this moment.”

“All righty, what about food?” Darcy said. “And we should find him a room anyway,” she added. “Private spaces are important.”

“This is not a hostel,” Tony muttered, but he thought about it, and then nodded. “Okay, yeah, we have some other rooms upstairs that are still empty.”

“Tony.” Steve caught Tony’s arm as they started to head for the doors. “I–look. This worked out all right. But we’re a team, okay? Don’t pull this kind of stunt again without running it by all of us.”

Tony looked him in the eye, lips thin. “I’m not sorry. And I won’t make that promise. We don’t have time, Steve.”

Steve drew breath to shout.

And then Darcy was between them. “Guys, chill. Steve. Tony’s just worried, okay?”

“I can’t let… things… happen,” Tony said. “Because I was too afraid to try and fix it.”

Jane thought those words seemed to hit Steve hard. He relaxed and stepped back. “You did it because you were trying to… to keep us safe.”

“Always,” Tony said.

“Tony will exercise his judgment in the future and tell us these things if at all possible,” Darcy said firmly, looking each of them in they eye in turn. “And he probably should’ve come to us this time, but we’ll forgive him because his intentions were good. Okay? Good compromise?”

“Sure,” Steve said. “Dinner?”

“Oh yeah. Then sleep.” Darcy glanced at her phone. “I’ll order mass quantities of pizza, since none of our capable cooks is here tonight.

Jane watched them leave, then turned her attention back to the StarkPad in Helen’s hand. “Let’s stay here and go over this,” she murmured.

Helen nodded. “Good pla–”

“Jane,” Darcy called.
Jane and Helen looked up. Darcy stood by the elevator doors with Loki and Steve. “Come eat with us,” Darcy said. “You’ve been down here for more than a day living off prepackaged food.”

“Because pizza is so much better?” Jane retorted.

Darcy grinned. “At least it’s hot. You also need sleep. There’s these things called ‘beds’ and I know it’s been a while, but they’re way more comfortable than lab tables.”

Jane sighed and started walking. “Okay, fine.”

“In the morning?” Helen asked, putting the tablet down.

“For sure,” Jane agreed.

“Helen, want to eat with us?” Darcy asked.

Helen paused. “I–”

“Darcy–” Jane said.

“It’s fine, I cleared it,” Darcy said, and Jane knew she meant she’d spoken to Loki and Steve about maintaining Loki and Bucky’s disguises. “What do you say?”

Helen joined Jane by the elevators. “I accept.”

“Welcome to the party,” Darcy said with a grin.
Chapter 128

Paris, France

January 2012

Pietro kept a close eye on Nick Fury. He knew he could take down Hydra’s director in a second, but he also knew that if Fury got the drop on him and threatened Wanda, he’d have Pietro by the balls, and Fury was smart enough to know that. Pietro wasn’t too worried, since he’d process and react before Fury got his gun out of his holster, but he could have a sniper, or a suicide vest, or someone aiming at Pietro with a tranquilizer dart… Yeah. Best to be careful.

“It’s the Avengers,” Wanda said quietly.

Fury’s eyes flicked around them. They’d relocated to the Notre Dame, again so that the strangers wouldn’t be noticed and their conversation wouldn’t be eavesdropped on. “I heard. They took down your old place in Sokovia yesterday.”

“Yes,” Wanda said angrily, “and no one told us where to go if the fortress fell.”

“So you ripped my location out of Strecker’s mind, and found me,” Fury said. “Ballsy.”

Wanda shrugged. “It was the first thing I found. We were interrupted.”

“How did you stand up to them?” Fury asked, leaning forward with a gleam in his eye.

“We did well,” Pietro said, grinning. “That one random man–Liam–I almost had him. Same with the Black Widow. They figured out how to sense me coming, but they couldn’t react fast enough. They split up to search the fortress, but…” His smile fell, remembering how it had felt to be trapped by the Magician. Like his skin suddenly weighed as much as lead. He resisted the urge to get up and run and run until the memory burned away. He’d only been like this for two years, but he already couldn’t stand the thought of living without his power.

“But then the Magician trapped us,” Wanda finished. “Took my power and trapped Pietro like a fly in honey.”


“Yes,” Wanda said.

“And did you get anything from his mind?”

Wanda took a breath. Pietro reached out and pressed a hand into her lower back, steadying her. He didn’t know what it was like to reach into other people’s minds, and didn’t want to know, because it took a heavy toll on his sister sometimes.

“He’s powerful,” she said. “Highly intelligent. I had less than a second before Pietro got us out, but–he was remembering being controlled before. We believe by the scepter.”

Fury’s eyes widened. “So he was someone Loki enslaved?”
“Possibly,” Pietro said.

“There was no one by the name of Liam Hillworth working for SHIELD on the Tesseract,” Fury said flatly. “So Loki must have picked him up somewhere else.”

Wanda and Pietro exchanged a look.

“What do you want from me?” Fury asked.

A waiter appeared and left a coffee on the table.

“Two black coffees, please,” Pietro said.

“Of course.” The waiter vanished back to the kitchen.

“We want to help you,” Wanda said flatly. “You wish to take down the Avengers, and we have the same goal. We can be useful to each other. Which is why Hydra recruited and experimented on us in the first place.”

Fury examined them both. “You were the only two who survived Strecker’s experiments.”

“Yes,” Wanda said.

“Why?”

“We wanted it more,” she said simply.

Pietro leaned forward, the familiar hate bubbling in his stomach. “We were ten years old,” he said. “Having dinner with our parents. When the first shell hit, two floors below, it made a hole in the floor. Our parents fell in, and the whole building started coming apart. I grabbed her and rolled under the bed and the second shell hit. But, it didn’t go off. It just… sat there in the rubble, three feet from our faces. And on the side of the shell was painted one word.”

“Stark,” Wanda said, ten years of hate packed into one syllable.

“We waited three days for Stark to kill us,” Pietro said, meeting Fury’s one eye. “Every shift in the rubble, every time they tried to dig us out, we thought it would go off. It never did.”

“He should have killed us then,” Wanda said simply.

Fury tilted his head, watching them both. “I see.”

The waiter appeared again, placed two cups of coffee on the table, and left.

Wanda took a sip from hers.

“Where’s my agent?” Fury asked.

“You mean Luc Durand?” Wanda said. “Born Sebastien Allard? Working for Hydra to pass on information from the DGSE because you blackmailed him?”

“Yes,” Fury said evenly. “Him.”

“He won’t be joining us,” Pietro said. He didn’t know what his sister had seen in Luc Durand’s mind, but he could guess, based on her words as she’d left Durand a drooling disaster.
“But I can tell you what he was ready to pass on.” Wanda tapped her head. “I’ve got it all here, you see. It’s important. There are interesting things brewing in the United Nations.”

“In exchange for something, I presume,” Fury said.


Fury downed the last of his coffee. “Deal.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm on a roll today and this chapter's pretty short, so here ya go: gratuitous number 2. Sorry my updates haven't been very regular lately. The end of the school year is making everything hectic and I haven't had much time to write, and generally I don't post chapters until I write another one to the end to maintain my editing buffer.

Also, I read this fic today that was an Avengers high school AU and it was kinda sucky and last updated in 2013 and now I want to write one myself SO. (American) high school AU or hogwarts AU? (in the future after i finish this thing) (or as a side project idk i'll see how much time I have this summer) Vote in the comments please! (Or if you think I shouldn't that's also okay haha I won't be offended)
“Miss Lewis?”

“Yep,” Darcy said, looking up at the ceiling reflexively. Loki bit back a laugh. She really ought to know better; she’d spent enough time in the tower to be accustomed to the artificial intelligence running it. Although perhaps she was still adjusting to the fact that it was a female voice now that Friday had taken over in lieu of JARVIS.

“I have received word that General Ross is en route to the Tower, requesting a meeting with the Avengers,” Friday said.

Loki tensed, watching Darcy’s face closely.

“Has he now,” Darcy said, features sharpening in the way that said she was thinking. Loki enjoyed watching her like this, even as he too began to consider all the possible implications of this visit for the Avengers.

He’d grown rather… invested… in their success. And he had to admit that it was more than simply allying himself with anyone interested in opposing Thanos.

“How long until he gets here?” Darcy asked.

“He’s already here. He didn’t call ahead,” Friday said. “Just walked up to the receptionist in the lobby and sent up his message.”

Darcy was up in a blink. “Shit. They sent him up, didn’t they?”

“Yes,” Friday said.

“I’ll head upstairs,” Loki said, already on his feet.

Darcy glanced up at him. “Get Bucky too; he’s in the gym. Make yourselves look like hatstands or something if anyone comes up there.”

“Anyone?” he asked, lips curling. “Including you?”

“Idiot,” she said with a grin, and shoved him lightly. “Get going.”

“As you wish,” he said, and ducked out of the room.

The gym echoed with shouts.

Clint, Maria, Tony, and Natasha appeared to be cheering on Steve and Bucky, who were sparring in the middle of the boxing ring.

“Loki!” Clint shouted with a grin. “Come place a bet—”
“Stop, please,” Loki said. “Steve, James–”

Panting, they came to a halt. The others’ levity fell away when they took in Loki’s expression.

“General Ross is here,” he said. “He has requested a meeting with you all. James, you and I are retreating upstairs.”

“Use the safe room,” Tony said, already moving. “Natasha, you know how to use it, right?”

“Yes,” Natasha said. “I’ll show you.”

Loki followed her out. Behind him, he heard Tony telling Steve to go ahead, he had to run down to the lab and collect Bruce, Jane, and Vision.

Natasha led the two of them to the staircase and the safe room hidden there. It was a back stair only accessible from the upper floors where the Avengers lived, so they didn’t have to worry that Ross would suddenly appear around a corner. She showed them how to access the safe room, let them in, and closed the entrance behind them while Loki tried to process how quickly they’d let him into this space. A safe place for the Avengers to hide, Tony Stark’s secret refuge, and no one had made so much as a glance in protest.

“Food?” James asked.

Loki blinked at him. “Ah… there is sustenance here?”

“Oh yeah.” James found the refrigerator easily. Loki glanced around; the space was a home within the tower. Three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen, and entertainment room. They had a distinctly unoccupied air.

“Let’s see… Looks like Tony has some old pizza in here, a bagged salad… no, that’s nasty… Hey, frozen spaghetti! Want some?”

“I–yes, sure,” Loki said, gingerly seating himself in the slightly cramped kitchen space. He’d never spent much time around James unless Natasha or Steve was there as well.

“Good choice.” James pulled out a plastic box of pasta, tomato sauce, and meatballs, removed the lid, and reached for the microwave. Loki didn’t like microwaves; they always sounded as if they were about to explode when the food inside began hissing and popping. “This might be a minute,” James added.

“Let me,” Loki said, holding out a hand.

James hesitated, then gave him the box.

Loki murmured a word and waved his fingers over the spaghetti. Green light dripped off his palm. In three seconds, the spell was done, and he handed the now-steaming box back to James.

“That’s useful,” James said, blinking. “I’m not going to get poisoned, right?”

“No,” Loki said. Strange that James still thought himself at risk for poisoning; Loki’s oath bound him. “If it would comfort you, I will eat first.”

James glanced at him. “Oh. I was joking.”

“Ah,” Loki said, and looked down. “It was my mistake.”
James passed Loki a plate and fork across the counter, dumped the box of spaghetti between them, and sat down. “Do people get poisoned a lot on Asgard?”

“Some people are at risk,” Loki said carefully, transferring a portion of the food to his plate. James took an even bigger helping. “Were you one of them?”

Loki’s lips twisted. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“I was not well liked,” Loki said. “My–Odin and Thor made sure of that.”

“What’d they do?” James said.

Loki hesitated, decided that Steve’s friend meant no harm and that it couldn’t hurt to be honest, and kept going. “I’m a seidmann, you see. Mage. They consider magic to be dirty trickery, dishonorable.” He sneered. “And I don’t fight like them, either. Thor is all… brute force, blunt charges–by the Norns, he fights with a hammer. I use my mind and I don’t always jump in swinging. For that I was shunned. And I like to cause mischief, which was not particularly endearing once I was older than a century or so.”

“God, it’s weird how old you are,” James muttered, except his mouth was so full it sounded like “Goh, iss weef ho’od y’aw.” He swallowed, continued. “That’s pretty idiotic.”

Loki grinned a little bit. “I thought so as well.”

They finished their small meal in silence.

James put the dishes in the sink while Loki packed the remaining spaghetti back into the freezer.

“So,” James said, sitting back down. “What’s going on with you and Darcy?”

Loki almost flinched. “What do you mean?”

“We’re not blind,” James said. “We’ve all seen the way you watch her. You guys were spending a fair amount of time with each other, then two months ago she started avoiding you, and now you’re talking again but something still seems off.”

“I don’t see how my relationship with Miss Lewis is in any way your concern,” Loki said.

James shrugged, but there was something sharp in his eyes. “We’re all friends here, Loki. I don’t want her hurt.”

Loki’s lips curled into a not-smile. He saw James glance at the thin white scars on them and knew the Midgardian was wondering how they’d happened. “Meaning you wish to ensure that I am not using her as a mistress to pass my time here.”

“If you want to put it so bluntly,” James said, leaning forward, “then yeah.”

“Touching,” Loki said drily. “Rest assured, I have no intentions of doing so.” She is far too clever to be fooled in such a way.

“But there’s something between you two.”

“As you said.” Loki angled his head. “We’re all friends here.”
James considered this for a moment. “When I met Natasha, she hated me,” he said.

Loki blinked. That was… not where he’d expected this conversation to go.

“She’d been on her own for so long that she couldn’t stand the thought of having a partner.” James shrugged. “Even after she figured out they hadn’t saddled her with a useless green kid, it took her a while to–let me in. And me to let her in, honestly. We’d both been through some shit. But I had the old me somewhere deep down, even though I didn’t remember being Bucky Barnes–only Zima, only the Soldier–telling me it was okay to trust people. Okay to want someone I could be real with. Natasha… she was three when they took her to the Red Room. She was raised in this life, not forced into it. It took her longer.” His voice was faltering, like he wasn’t used to speaking for this long at a time. Loki found himself drawn into the story. “Even when we were fighting for our lives, outnumbered and outgunned, every time we walked back into one of the KGB’s little outposts, we knew that if anyone found out what we were to each other, it’d be a death sentence. But we didn’t call it off. We didn’t know what the future would bring, but we tried. We made the most of it in the time we had. And when they took me away from her, all I could think was… it was worth it.” He paused. “So I guess what I’m saying is, everyone needs someone they trust. Someone who really sees them. You might not be human, but I don’t think you’re so different from us that’s not true.”

You have no idea, Loki thought darkly, but he saw James’ point.

Yet Darcy had walked away from him. Not the other way around.

Loki hated himself, suddenly and furiously, for the fact that–of all the women in the Nine Realms, and for the first time in his long, long life–he found himself developing feelings for a Midgardian. She was short-lived.

“She is mortal,” Loki said in a low voice, and then cursed himself for speaking. But the words kept coming. “And I am not.”

“There are ways to get around that,” James said. “Come on, you’re Loki. An actual deity. You can travel between worlds.”

“The only way that is safe,” Loki said coldly, “is no longer available to me.” Never would they offer one of the Apples of Immortality to one of the Jotnar. Particularly not when that Jotun is me.

“So find a way.”

James shrugged when Loki glared at him. “You seem like the kind of person who can think of a way to do just about anything, if it matters enough to you.”

I am in no way sure that she would even want this. But when Loki remembered the fire in Darcy’s eyes when she spoke of the power she wanted, her dreams of changing the world, he decided he could guess what her answer would be to the offer of immortality.

“I wish I knew what was happening,” James muttered, glaring at the ceiling. “I hate hiding.”

Loki paused. He’d dismissed the idea earlier, but…

I am in no way sure that she would even want this. But when Loki remembered the fire in Darcy’s eyes when she spoke of the power she wanted, her dreams of changing the world, he decided he could guess what her answer would be to the offer of immortality.

“I wish I knew what was happening,” James muttered, glaring at the ceiling. “I hate hiding.”

Loki paused. He’d dismissed the idea earlier, but…

“Ross already knows who we are,” he said slowly. “Liam Hillworth and your alias–Ryan Dessen, correct?”

James looked at him. “You mean…”

“They don’t call me the God of Mischief for nothing,” Loki said with a grin.
James grinned back.
Chapter 130

Avengers Tower

February 2012

The team was waiting in the conference room, one level below the penthouse. Technically, this was a lab level, but Tony’s security meant you came up to the conference room and wouldn’t get any farther unless he really liked you, so Steve wasn’t particularly worried that Ross’s people would find there way into somewhere they weren’t supposed to be. The long glass table faced bay windows looking out over the New York skyline, but no one was paying attention to the view. Steve looked first at Vision, standing off to the side. He still wasn’t sure how to act around the reserved and unfailingly polite–man? Cyborg? Artificial intelligence?–they’d created, though Vision had been nothing but helpful and seemed to agree with the Avengers’ anti-United Nations stance.

“How do we handle this?” Maria asked Darcy.

Darcy tapped the table. “Play it safe. Don’t make any promises, don’t say anything incriminating, definitely don’t tell him anything about “Liam” and “Ryan” upstairs.” She glanced at Vision=.

“Don’t answer too many of his questions if he asks them, Vis. We don’t want to show our cards yet. There’s not a lot I can do until I know what he wants, but I’m guessing it has to do with the UN vote over the Avengers Accords.”

“Has he convinced the United Nations to vote sooner?” Vision asked.


“Here we go,” Tony muttered.

Ross marched through the door, attended by two secretaries, one man and one woman. His aides looked mostly cool and collected but Steve saw the way their eyes flicked between the Avengers and fear, awe, and love warred there. He hated it. Hated being this idol to these people.

“Good morning,” Ross said.

“Morning,” Steve replied.

Tony shifted in his seat. “To what do we owe the… pleasure?”

Ross frowned at him, then at Bruce, standing quietly by the windows. If nothing else, Steve would have a problem with Ross for the effect he had on Bruce. An intelligent, clever, honestly goofy man turned quiet and cautious, shrinking in on himself.

“Lewis, you’ll be pleased to learn the vote’s been delayed,” Ross said in Darcy’s direction. “I hope you’re enjoying your little meddling.”

Darcy grinned at him. “I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about, but it is good to hear that.”

Steve’s lips twitched. When Ross looked back at Bruce, Darcy shot Steve a quick wink.

“That’s not why I’ve come.” Ross snapped his fingers at his male aid, who’d been staring at Natasha and now blushed, fumbling to hand over a bulging file folder to Ross. “I’ve come because the actual text of the agreement has been finalized, even if the vote and signing won’t be for another month or
two, and I’ve only spoken with a few of you about this separately. Consider this your official briefing on the Avengers Accords.”

“Teacher, teacher,” Sam said, putting his hand up in the air.

Ross glared at him.

“Can we ask questions? Because I have a question.” Sam’s dark eyes looked lazy, almost sleepy, and he seemed completely at ease. Steve knew he could be on his feet and swinging in the blink of an eye. “I know I’m new to this bandwagon, but it seems to me the Avengers have done a hell of a lot more good than they have harm.”

“**You would** think that,” Ross said. “**Everyone’s the hero of their own story, aren’t they?**”

“Says the man who tried to kidnap and torture his daughter’s boyfriend for illegal human experimentation,” Bruce said quietly.

It was as if the temperature in the room fell ten degrees. Steve stayed in his seat, but he saw Ross stiffen, heard Natasha and Clint reach for their weapons, knew they’d jump in to kick Ross out of the room if this went south. Which was good, because Steve knew a Hulk-out in the middle of Manhattan wouldn’t help their case.

“You’re a danger to yourself and others, Doctor,” Ross said sternly. “It was for the greater good. Just because you’ve learned some semblance of control doesn’t mean I’m comfortable with you walking around population centers, but we all know why I can’t just drag you in anymore.”

“For one thing, you’d be crucified by the press,” Natasha said.

Ross’ mouth twisted. Steve saw that he knew it was true.

“You’re dangerous,” he said flatly. “All of you. You’re out-of-control vigilantes and you undermine the legitimacy of the—”

“And there’s the real problem,” Maria said. “You can’t have us making the United Nations look bad, can you?” She cocked her head. “And since when are you so invested in the United Nations, Mr. Secretary? You work for the United States.”

“The United Nations is the only organization with international clout,” Ross said. “As much as I’d like the lot of you bound to the United States government alone—and every other government feels the same way—the world would never stand for it. They only accepted you working with SHIELD because the World Security Council had appointees from all around the globe. You’ll be working for the United Nations to further the good of mankind.”

“Oh boy,” Darcy said. “Bad word choice there, buddy. Bound? Seriously? Like you’re putting leashes on all of us?”

Ross held up one hand, palm up. “That is essentially what must happen. You’re going to hurt someone!” he insisted, glaring around the table. “You’ve already hurt plenty of people!”

Tony stood up. Steve looked over and was surprised by the depth of anger in his eyes. It matched his own. “No,” Tony snapped. “**Aliens** hurt a lot of people. **Terrorists** hurt a lot of people. Fucking **Hydra** hurt a lot of people. That wasn’t us.”

Ross rubbed his forehead. Steve was irritated to realize he and Ross had a similar tic. “Do you need me to list the cost of the destruction you’ve left in your wake? In some places, it resembles war
zones. I know you’re not too naive to understand that whenever you go in guns blazing, civilians—innocents—get hurt and die.”

“Do you want to know why that hasn’t stopped us?” Steve said. Quietly, but his tone was laced with anger. He didn’t stand. He’d learned a long time ago that staying seated while others postured could be a very powerful gesture. “Because Hydra would’ve injured or killed millions more than those who got caught in the crossfire at the Triskelion. Because allowing the Chitauri to take New York and use it as a staging point to conquer Earth would have meant a costly war, millions dead. Because leaving the Sinaloa in possession of those drugs would have been abandoning thousands of people to one of the most painful deaths imaginable. Because letting Hydra’s little strongholds stand means surrendering.

“I regret and mourn for the lives lost. We will always do everything we can to minimize or eliminate casualties. But that doesn’t mean we stop our fight.” Steve glared at Ross.

There was a pause.

“How inspiring,” someone drawled, and Steve looked up to see Liam Hillworth and Ryan Dessen standing in the door.
Chapter 131

Avengers Tower

February 2012

“You,” Ross said, face rapidly turning red. “Hillworth—”

“And me,” Bucky said, looking annoyed.

“You’re just a soldier,” Ross said coldly. “Hillworth’s got, what, some kind of ice powers?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you mean,” Loki said unconcernedly. “Sorry we’re late.”

“No, this is actually good timing,” Ross said. “I can register you now.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “I dislike the implications of that statement.” Darcy thanked God he was flattening his accent into American English. The Asgardian lilt would be too noticeable to anyone who’d seen footage or recordings of Thor, which Ross definitely had.

“Too bad for you.” Ross gestured his female aide forward. “This is Mandy Clearwater. She’ll ask you a few questions—date of birth, parents, social security number. Take your fingerprints. Have you served in the army?”

“You know perfectly well that I have not,” Loki drawled. “And no, I do not think I care to sit for your examination.”

“You don’t have a choice,” Ross snapped.

“Actually, yes he does.”

Ross turned to glare at her.

Darcy gave him a sweet smile. This was honestly kind of hilarious. Loki’s timing sucked, but it would’ve happened at some point, and she was pretty sure Ross would’ve demanded to meet him today anyway. This way was more entertaining. “I know you’ve got that bill about registering ‘enhanced persons’, but last I checked it hasn’t gotten out of the Senate yet. So no, Liam doesn’t have to do anything of the kind.”

“He’s dangerous,” Ross countered. “He—”

“It’d be great if you could find a different argument, Secretary,” Steve said darkly.

The look Ross shot him was full of vitriolic hatred. “This is the only one that counts, Captain.”

“Pity it hasn’t convinced me yet.” Steve stood up and walked around the table until he was between Ross and Loki. “Did you have anything else to say?”

“No,” Ross gritted out.

“You can see yourself out,” Tony said with a dismissive wave of his hand.
Oh shit, Darcy thought gleefully, watching Ross’ face bypass tomato and approach fire engine in color.

“This isn’t the end of this,” Ross warned, and stormed out of the room.

[Classified Location], Switzerland

February 2012

“Have you looked into his head yet?” Pietro whispered.

Wanda frowned. “Not yet,” she admitted under her breath. “He is… I do not wish to alert him to my presence if…”

She didn’t finish the sentence, but she knew Pietro would hear the rest of it. The unspoken if I can’t control my power, if I dredge up his deepest fears and give them to him clear as day.

It was the most unsettling and most powerful aspect of her gift. And the least controllable.

“I know you’re nervous,” Pietro hissed as they followed Fury deeper into the labyrinth of tunnels, “but I think it must be done. I do not trust him.”

“Of course you don’t,” she said. “He’s a betrayer.”

“Yes,” Pietro said. “And I’m sure he wants to know how it is we do what we do, since Strecker’s people wiped the data files in Sokovia. I do not want him to tie us down and stick us full of needles.”

“We would kill them all,” Wanda murmured.

“Unless they have some way of containing us that we do not know about,” Pietro said.

She knew he was right. It would be only prudent for Hydra to have been secretly developing ways to imprison them and nullify their gifts, not unlike what the Magician had done.

“I will do it,” she breathed. “I—give me a few minutes. Please.”

“Whatever you need.” Pietro hugged her one-armed as they walked, sensing her uncertainty, and then let go.

Wanda was suddenly and fiercely grateful to whatever order there was in the universe for giving them each other. She knew without a doubt that whatever came, she would stand by Pietro and he by her.

“Where are we going?” Pietro asked.

“It’s not much farther.” Fury dropped back to walk beside them. “This is an old facility; they discontinued it after the Cold War and we took it over in secret. As far as SHIELD knew, it was an outpost for agents in the field to stop and check in, but not much else. We were able to run a lot of operations out of here in secret. I had all my people pull out once SHIELD fell.”

“And what do you need to show us?”

“We built a state-of-the-art communications system,” Fury said proudly. “In order for you to understand what I’m planning on doing, you’ll need to speak to my ally.”
Pietro shot Wanda a look.

She nodded almost imperceptibly.

“We are very close to the surface here,” Pietro said with surprise, but Wanda knew he was alerting her to that fact so she would know to blast the ceiling if things went sour.

Fury shot him a look. “How can you know that?”

“His gift includes an… awareness of his–”

“–environment, which is very helpful to keep me from running into things,” Pietro finished. “I can tell there’s only about twenty feet of earth above us.”

Fury shrugged. “It’s a shallow facility. Relies on secrecy rather than deep-set bunkers to survive. It was never supposed to last this long when they built it. We’ve expanded below the original network some, but the deep earthworks are unstable. Something about the dirt here. I didn’t totally understand what the construction people told me.”

Wanda brushed Pietro’s hand with her own.

He started talking again, jabbering away to Fury as a distraction.

Carefully, so carefully, she spooled her power out. It was so much harder with her hands at her sides–so much of her gift relied on being able to move them–but Fury was three feet away and she would not let herself fail.

She slipped into his mind like a drop of food coloring in water.


He hated the Avengers more than she or Pietro. Hated–with a strength she couldn’t fathom.

And underneath it all, a bone-deep conviction.

That this was right. That what she’d just seen was good, was best.

Wanda couldn’t help but cry out.

And her power slipped its leash.

Darkness bloomed in Fury’s mind. In the past the nightmares she gave people were fed by her own anger and determination but this time it was fueled by her own horror, and that made it worse.

She didn’t have time to see more than a quick flash of Fury’s deepest fear–it involved him in a cell, and a crippling sense of powerlessness–

Fury swung a knife at her heart.

Wanda managed to block the blow with a tiny, reflexive shield. She was so off-kilter from what she’d just seen that she toppled backwards from the force, hands trapped beneath her.

He dropped the blade. Drew a gun. Fired right at her.

Wanda felt the bullet hit Pietro.
Her brother collapsed at her feet. Her brother, who’d just taken a bullet for her. Her brother, whose pain echoed through her own body like a ghost, who she knew with certainty was now mostly immobile.

Fury switched his aim to Pietro. “Guess I’ll have to make do with one of you,” he said, breathing hard. “He won’t be able to run with two shattered knees. I bet you’ll be pretty cooperative when he’s locked in a cell somewhere, won’t you?”

_No_.

Wanda would not put herself or her brother at this monster’s mercy.

She threw her hands up and forward.

Power blasted from her in a wave, knocking Fury’s bullets aside when he fired at the movement and hurling him back into the wall. He rolled through a doorway. Wanda heard him shouting into his radio and threw her hands up instead, fingers moving, scowling with concentration.

The ceiling rumbled. And peeled open like a blossoming flower, in pieces. Tonnes of matter hurled aside. Barely a pebble fell into the tunnel.

Wanda was tired already—she’d rarely had a chance to stretch her power to this kind of limit—but she couldn’t stop. She levitated herself and Pietro up into the air, through the hole she’d carved. Over the edge. Depositing them safely on the grass above.

Fresh air had never tasted this sweet.

She could feel her power bucking, straining at her control. She’d once released this much of it, lost her mastery of herself, and flattened ten acres of forest, putting herself in bed for a day.

Wanda _would not_ let that happen again.

Her hands were trembling slightly. She felt blood dripping out of her nose but kept moving, fingers instinctively shaping her will.

Piles of earth began to move.

She looked over the edge. Fury was looking up at her, gun half-raised.

_Die_ , she thought, and swept all that earth back into the tunnel.

It collapsed into a sinkhole with a _boom_.

But she could tell there were gaps. It wouldn’t take long to get someone, then many someones, up out of that tunnel. And there had to be other entrances, other exits, than the one she’d just closed Fury’s way back to.

“Pietro,” she said, crawling to her brother. “Pietro, we have to go.”

His eyes fluttered open. Wanda swallowed the crippling relief that threatened to turn her into a pile of marshmallows. _Thank God._ “Are you—”

She could feel only an echo of his pain, and already it was receding.

Not for him. Pietro winced when he tried to sit up.

“No,” Wanda said sharply. She couldn’t brainwash an entire hospital into forgetting them, not when she was this spent, and they couldn’t afford to let their location slip. Not when Pietro was injured and Fury would now consider them Hydra’s enemies.

Pietro talked her through packing his wound with strips of her undershirt and using duct tape from his backpack to hold the makeshift bandages in place, but– “I need real attention,” he told her. “My body heals quickly, but it could heal wrong. Remember my ankle?”

Yes, Wanda remembered. Pietro had broken his ankle soon after his enhancement, before he’d figured out how to process his environment at the speed at which he ran; the foot healed crooked and had to be rebroken and splinted in place. She had a vivid and horrifying image of his foot pointing the wrong way. He’d joked about keeping it like that and working in a circus. The rocket-fast backward-footed man.

“Fine,” she said. “But not immediately. I can’t–can’t keep us both forgettable right now–”

“We need to go somewhere,” Pietro said. “The Avengers.”

Wanda knew he was right. And she knew that what she’d just learned from Fury was only a piece of a much larger puzzle. A terrifying piece. And one that she could not allow to happen. But it still galled her.

“Fine. We go to the Avengers,” she said, because they didn’t have any better option, and helped him stand, slinging his usable arm around her shoulders. It was a good thing her brother was skinny. “I learned–in Fury’s mind–things they need to know.” She took a breath. “I hope they’ll help us.”

“Me too,” he said.

They began to hobble toward the distant roar of a freeway.

“They were willing to help us in Sokovia,” Wanda said. “And we have no other choice. I have to tell them.”

Pietro was in pain; he didn’t–couldn’t–answer for a few minutes. Wanda felt no one behind them and allowed a small rest leaning on young trees.

“What did you learn?” he gasped finally. “That is so urgent.”

“I’ll tell you on the plane,” Wanda said.

“Plane?”

“Yes,” she said grimly, and got them walking again. “I can’t control a hospital. But I can manage several people at a time. We’re going to flag down a car, then I’m going to get us a ride to the airport, make our driver forget us, get us on a private plane, and make them forget us too. We’ll fly to New York, and hail a cab to Avengers Tower. By then I’ll be recovered enough to get us past the human security.”

“Good… plan,” Pietro huffed. “Faster… without me.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Wanda said sharply.
“Mean it.” Pietro stumbled and she hauled him upright. The road was just up ahead; she could feel people’s minds whizzing past. In and out of her perception range. “If it means… you survive… leave me. And go.”

She tightened her grip on him. “Would you rather I be free and you at Hydra’s mercy? I wouldn’t stop until you were free, no matter what they bade me do. That is not an option.”


“I mean it.” Wanda stopped and turned him sideways to meet her eyes. He was slumped so much that they were almost the same height for the first time since they were six. “I’m never leaving you.”

“Fine,” he mumbled, a smile tugging at his mouth.

Wanda went back to hauling him along. Muscles burning, mind frantically calculating the steps she’d need to take to get him to New York without dying. It should take less than twelve hours to reach Avengers Tower.

That had to be fast enough.

Chapter End Notes

DOUBLE SCENES TODAY!

The one with Ross and Loki and Bucky was pretty short, so here’s two for the price of one! Sorry updates have been on a weird schedule. School's out, and my writing/laptop-access times are a lot less consistent.

I'm seeing a common theme in the comments I've been getting for the last few chapters, and it's this: "thank you for fixing the Civil War canon!!!" So here's a reply en masse, re: Civil War Canon: that movie made me SO ANGRY in a few points. Ross/UN people are awful. Bucky is innocent. Back off Tony because he was trying to do what he thought was right and yeah, he attacked Bucky, but those weren't exactly the best of circumstances for him to watch his parents die while the (albeit blameless) murderer stood right next to him.

Anyway. Yeah, I agree, there's lots to fix about Civil War and believe me I'm having TONS of fun basically rewriting it. There's more to come!
“I’m starting a new line of prostheses,” Tony announced, striding into the penthouse for the second time that morning.

Steve blinked at him. “What? Also, why is your hair blond?”


“And you’re telling me this… why?” Steve asked.

Tony frowned. “Did somebody eat your special donut?”

“What?”

“You are in a bad mood,” Tony said, enunciating each word. “Do I need to kill someone? Warn me now so I can get a drink first.”

“No, no killing people,” Steve said, irritated.

“Before breakfast,” Natasha clarified. “And why are you blond?”

Tony flinched. She’d arrived in the penthouse silently and unnoticed, even though the kitchen was open to the rest of the space. “It’s not before breakfast, I ate when I got up two hours ago, Loki’s playing a prank on me, and also, you need to make noise,” he said as Bucky followed her in the door and over to them. “Seriously. Or I’ll hang a bell on you.”

“Good luck with that,” Bucky muttered. He at least had audible footsteps.

Natasha surveyed the counter. “Who made pancakes?”

“Sam,” Tony said. “So don’t worry about food poisoning.”

“This is a great way to start the morning,” Natasha said, sitting down next to Steve and serving herself four pancakes from the large stack in the middle of the counter. Bucky sat down on her other side.

Steve, at least, looked marginally less grouchy. “How’d it go?” he asked.

“Good.” Bucky grinned. He and Natasha and Tony had spent the last four days in Hong Kong, chasing down the headquarters of a human trafficking ring. “Their whole network collapsed with the leaders gone. Then we got home and Loki turned his hair blond, which pretty much put a cherry on top.”

Tony ignored that comment and remembered blasting his way into the shipping crates and helping a line of emaciated men, women, and children blinking into the light. He’d enjoyed killing the people who did it. “Chinese officials came in and arrested everyone that was left,” he said.

Steve nodded.
“Where’s Sam now?” Natasha asked.

“Went down to the VA.” Tony shoved the syrup closer to her. “He’ll be back later this afternoon.”

Bucky’d been studying Steve. Abruptly, he reached out and tapped the table. “Something’s wrong. What is it?”

“Darcy,” Steve said unhappily.

Tony threw up his arms. “Oh, so you answer him and not me? I’m insulted.”

“You’ll get over it,” Natasha said.

Tony neatly upended a pancake onto her head. No syrup or butter—he wasn’t suicidal.

Natasha shot him a look that promised retribution and turned back to Steve and Bucky. “What about Darcy?”

Steve shrugged. “She and Loki.”

Bucky winced. “There’s something going on there.”

“Do you think they’re sleeping together?” Tony said.

Steve choked.

Natasha pressed her lips together as if to contain a laugh. “No, we’d have noticed. But there’s definitely attraction. And they’re definitely awkward around one another.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about this,” Steve said. “He’s immortal. And is it really any of our business?”

“Darcy matters,” Tony said flatly. “If he said something that hurt her, we can’t let that go.”

“I don’t think he would. I think he really cares,” Bucky said. “Did no one notice how they were at Christmas? Staring at each other and looking away?”

“I saw,” Tony said slowly. “But… I’m with Steve. If neither of them is hurting the other, then I don’t want to get in the middle of that. I like my face how it is.”

Natasha shrugged. “I’ll keep an eye on them.”

“So, you’re going to stalk them?” Tony asked.

She grinned.

Darcy, Loki, Jane, and Bruce walked in from the lab, Jane and Bruce chattering animatedly while Loki followed behind and Darcy marched in front of the scientists.

Natasha shot Tony, Steve, and Bucky a look that said case in point.

“Oh my god, yes, food,” Darcy said, spotting the pancakes. “You superpeople better not have eaten all of that.”

“There’s more in the oven staying warm,” Tony said.

Darcy found the plate and started dishing out more pancakes to Loki, Jane, and Bruce. Tony heard
snatches of their conversation and

“Okay, what were you saying about prosthetics?” Steve asked.

Tony grabbed that train of thought, a heady cocktail of excitement and triumph washing away any worry about Darcy and Loki’s awkward little orbit. “Working on Barnes’ arm gave me an idea. New prostheses, neurally integrated and sold on the open market. Not superpowered limbs like yours, popsicle, but still pretty damn cool. And priced where normal people can afford them. I mean, ish, they’re kind of ridiculously expensive to manufacture on a large scale and they’d all have to be custom because of the neural integration, but I had Friday run simulations and we could get the cost down to a reasonable price for most people in first and second world countries within five years.”

“Why?” Steve asked.

Tony stared at him. Was it not obvious? “So I can implant mind control technology on people’s bodies and influence their minds through the neural integration.”

Steve paused.

Bucky snorted. “Really, Steve? You fell for that?”

“Okay, okay,” Steve said, laughing a little. “I never can tell with you, Tony. What’s the real reason?”

“Because I can. Because, yeah, it’ll be lucrative, I have almost no competitors. Because it’s the right thing to do. Because it’d be ridiculous to sit on this tech when it could help so many people.”

“And you called him the selfish one,” Darcy said around a mouthful of pancakes.

Steve winced just slightly.

Tony bit back his irritation. Steve hadn’t been able to just–accept it. No, he had to push. He had to find out Tony’s exact reasons to make sure they were up to his standards.

Steve has trust issues too. He’d just have to… to keep being better. He’d made mistakes. Too many to count. He couldn’t slip again.

Tony realized he was doing what Sam talked about sometimes–checking out of the real world, getting too internal–and made an effort to tune back in.

Vision had come in without him noticing and was studying the pancakes clinically. Tony missed JARVIS but he was getting accustomed to Vision’s quiet, helpful presence. They’d determined that he was, in fact, conscious, and that he did need food. His body was functionally a normal human body, save for the fact that every cell in it was permeated with vibranium in a way only Helen and Bruce completely understood (which irritated Tony to no end). “These are pancakes?”

“Yeah, try one,” Darcy said, shoving a plate in his direction. “Butter, syrup, little bit of powdered sugar, and you’re golden.”

“No, no, strawberries and cinnamon!” protested Jane. “Darcy, honestly–”

“–yes, I know, I’m a genius and you just can’t handle it,” Darcy retorted.

“You’ve had this argument before, haven’t you?” Bruce said.

Darcy grinned. “What tipped you off?”
Bruce opened his mouth and Vision reached out for the pancakes.

“Also, nice color, Goldilocks,” Darcy said with a wicked grin.

“Oh, for the love of—”

Tony’s earpiece crackled, the one he always wore in case Friday needed to tell him something sensitive. “Boss, there’s an intruder situation.”

“Go speaker,” he said. “Who is it?”

“Wanda and Pietro Maximoff,” Friday said through the overhead speakers.

Everyone froze.

“Suit up,” Steve said, standing abruptly.

They snapped into motion. Tony grabbed his bracelets off the counter. Snapped them on. The hidden compartment with a Mark 7 suit began to rumble open. Bruce and Jane bolted for the lab.

“Loki,” Bucky said, standing, features slipping from his ease into hard, brutal lines. “Disguise?”

Loki stepped toward him, already casting his spell.

Steve and Natasha were already gone, probably to get their weapons and call Clint and Maria down. Vision cocked his head and his plain business casual clothes morphed into a gray-and-silver armored battlesuit.

Tony’s gauntlets streaked over to him. He caught them deftly. Felt the metal locking into place, rippling up his arms and shoulders and back as the rest of the suit followed, and with every piece of armor, he felt more comfortable in the world.

“Hold the elevator,” he snapped.

“They are in the stairs,” Friday responded. “She’s blasting all the doors open.”

“Video feed.”

The video popped up on the inside of Tony’s helmet as his faceplate locked down. He glared at what he saw: Wanda Maximoff, striding up the stairs with her fists thrust out in front of her, red light gleaming around her hands.

Then he hesitated.

Pietro was behind his sister. And he was obviously wounded.

“Who’s on comms?” he snapped.

Friday showed him a list: everyone except Clint, Bruce, and Jane were on comms. Even Darcy, who’d retreated to her office and returned with a Taser and a determined expression.

“She’s got Pietro. He looks wounded. They’re coming up the stairs,” Tony rattled off for his teammates. “Friday, open the doors, we might as well save those she hasn’t broken yet.”

“Got it, boss.”
Tony saw Wanda flinch and pause when the doors in the stairwell clunked open, and the set above that. She was only four flights below the penthouse.

“How’d it take this long to see them?” Steve asked, running back in. He was wearing combat boots now and his shield was on his arm, but other than that he hadn’t changed.

“Dr. Ellman walked them in,” Friday said. “He told me they were with him. I only sounded the alert when they went above the highest floor for which he has clearance.”

“Ellman…” Tony mused. “That guy from the communications research department?”

“Yep,” Darcy said. “Decent guy, doesn’t get me.”

“No one does,” Loki muttered.

Tony snorted. Darcy and Steve shot Loki surprised looks.

Clint, and Maria piled into the penthouse at the same time, all armed to the teeth and talking in low voices as they formed up by the stairwell doors. Maria in particular looked determined. Tony guessed she’d be opposed to letting Wanda Maximoff anywhere near her–Maria, of all people, didn’t like the idea of an enhanced running around with mind control powers.

Bucky, disguised, pulled weapons out of a cache behind the refrigerator, tossing two guns to Steve in the process. Tony checked on the ammo in his suit and started to follow them over to the stairwell door, where the others waited.

Loki summoned a pair of curved knives from who-knew-where and spun them around his fingers, glancing at Darcy.

Tony paused, bent down, pretended to be occupied with something in his right shin. With a gesture, he got Friday to boost the audio range on his helmet.

“Perhaps you ought not be here,” Loki murmured. “You have no combat training.”

“I have some,” Darcy said stubbornly.

“Enough to handle two Enhanced?”

“I took down your brother with this thing,” Darcy said, tapping her Taser on Loki’s chest and grinning. “Plus I’ve got the lot of you here. What could possibly go wrong?”

Loki half-reached for her, withdrew his hand, and started to turn.

Tony stood up and kept walking.

If this had happened to two friends in his twenties, he’d have locked them in a closet together. But Loki’d just magic his way out and Tony wasn’t twenty anymore–not that he’d had real friends when he was younger, not like this–and he didn’t want to interfere.

Although, if they didn’t sort things out soon, it could turn into an actual problem.

When Wanda and Pietro walked in the door, Pietro leaning on his sister’s shoulder, they found the Avengers arrayed in front of them, weapons hot.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Natasha said with a lazy smile.
“Office hours are ten to two,” Tony said. “It’s nine forty-seven and you don’t have an appointment.”

“Stark–” Wanda started.

“Tony, I’ve got this,” Steve said quietly. Almost pleadingly. He looked at Tony through the helmet and Tony could see an apology in his eyes for the way he’d spoken earlier.

Tony made a face even though they couldn’t see it and stepped aside with an exaggerated arm gesture.

Steve poked him in the ribs on the way by.

“Why have you come?” Steve asked.

Wanda didn’t answer. She was staring at Vision with her lips slightly parted.

“I’m injured,” Pietro said. Tony noticed the subtle nudge he gave his sister and the way she blinked as she focused back in on the rest of them. Vision had an expression on his face like he’d been hit with a brick. “And we… she… has information for you.”

“Last time I checked, you guys weren’t our biggest fans,” Maria said coldly.

“You have done damage to the world,” Pietro said. “But mostly our problem is with **him**.” He pointed at Tony.

“Get in line,” Tony said.

Pietro curled his lip.

“We have a common enemy.” Wanda swept her dark eyes over them. “Nick Fury.”

Tony straightened. “What do you know about Nick Fury?”

“He is working with an entity who is not from Earth,” Wanda began.

Loki tensed. Everyone in the circle felt the hum of his magic get louder. Darcy, next to him, rolled her shoulders. “Thanos,” he said, the name laced with hatred.

Wanda flinched. “How did you know?”

Loki’s jaw worked for a few seconds. “He and I have… unfinished business,” he said at last.

“That’s our point,” Pietro said. “My sister and I went to Fury.”

Tony’s head snapped up. “Friday, run a scan of the whole building,” he snapped, *cursing* himself for not checking sooner— “Steve, they could be a diversion.”

“We are not,” Wanda said. “You have to believe me—”

“Kinda don’t,” Tony said.

“I’ll check.” Bucky jerked his head and Clint followed him away from the circle. Bucky took the stairs up toward the roof and Clint went down to check the floors immediately below them.

Wanda clenched her fists.

“Easy there,” Steve said, holding out a hand. The warning was clear in his voice.
“I’m in the ceiling,” Natasha said directly to Tony’s earpiece. “I have a clear shot.”

Tony turned off his PA system. “Don’t kill them—”

“With a tranq gun, Tony, I’m not an idiot,” Natasha retorted.

“Just checking. Friday, tell Steve she’s up there, quietly.” Tony turned on his PA again just as Wanda very deliberately relaxed.

“We are not here to fight,” she said carefully.

“The way your brother’s glaring at me says otherwise,” Tony said.

Jane, Bruce, and Helen ran into the room. Bruce was carrying a large bulbous gun that Tony recognized as a prototype stun laser. Tony held up a hand and they came to a stop behind him.

“I looked in Fury’s mind,” Wanda said. “I saw what he plans to do. And what he has already done.”

“Using Hydra to try and take over the world? You mean that little historical footnote?” Darcy said.

“Not just that,” Wanda said. “He first contacted Thanos three years ago.”

“Three years?” Steve said, stunned.

Wanda nodded. “They struck a deal.”

“Well, now we know who Thanos’ contact in SHIELD was,” Maria said.

“Wait—you knew about Thanos?” Pietro said.

Tony flipped up his faceplate, deciding they weren’t going to shoot him. “Obviously.”

“Tony, you’re not helping,” Maria muttered.

“Yes, we knew about Thanos,” Steve said.

“How?”

Tony could tell Steve was very deliberately not looking at Loki. “It’s a long story. What did Thanos offer Fury?”

“Aid to Hydra,” Wanda said promptly. “And the invasion was part of that. It was intended to frighten the world, to give Fury an opportunity to rally resistance beneath his command. Then he could be humanity’s savior by negotiating a peace treaty once the war was mostly lost. He would become the ruler of Earth and the people that remained.”

“But when the Avengers stopped Loki’s invasion, Fury’s plan changed,” Darcy said, thinking it through. “So Fury… Project Insight. He managed to use people’s fear, played the long game, and launched Project Insight as a way to stop it ever happening again.”

“That’s when he sent the drugs to the Sinaloa,” Loki added. “To weaken Earth’s population, lull the citizens into an artificial stupor.”

“But we stopped that too…” Darcy mused. She and Wanda exchanged a long, measuring look. Wanda seemed slightly impressed. “So what’s his play now?”
Wanda opened her mouth.

Gasped.

And Pietro collapsed.
“Get the cradle!” Steve ordered instantly.

Jane, Bruce, and Helen bolted for the elevator to the labs.

Tony flexed his wrist and stepped forward, out of the suit. It reformed behind him. “Guard mode,” he ordered, and it floated along behind him watchfully. He didn’t fully trust the Maximoffs. Though, to be fair, Pietro didn’t look like he’d be coming after Tony anytime soon. And Wanda should stay calm for the sake of her brother. But still.

Tony went to Pietro’s feet, Steve to his shoulders. They had Pietro halfway off the ground when Loki stepped forward. “Allow me,” he said, and without asking, spread his hands. Tony didn’t quite catch the words he whispered but Pietro’s weight vanished until he was floating steadily in midair.

“Call the elevator,” Loki said, guiding the Maximoff kid.

“It’s coming, sir,” Friday said over the speakers.

Wanda flinched. “Who is that?”

“My artificial intelligence,” Tony said, following Loki. “Friday. Come on, cradle’s this way.”

Wanda followed him, her dislike of him seeming to war with curiosity.

“What is the cradle?” she asked.

“Helen’s crown jewel. Cellular regeneration machine. It made the walking computer over there.” Tony nodded at Vision, who was speaking in low voices with Steve and Natasha, who’d appeared out of her hiding spot in the ceiling. Tony resolved to look for it later; he had no idea where she’d been squirreled away.

Wanda frowned. Stepped into the elevator with Tony, Loki, and her brother. Tony gestured the suit away; it wouldn’t fit in there with all of them and he had more down in the lab spaces.

Pietro mumbled something and blinked.

The elevator started to move.

“What... where...” He tried to sit up but couldn’t move.

“Lie still,” Loki said. Tony blinked—his voice had a ring of command that was not magical. Sometimes he forgot Loki’d led armies into battle. That he had a thousand years of life more than any of them. It was disconcerting.
Pietro obeyed instinctively, then scowled.

“They’re going to help you,” Wanda said, laying a hand on her brother’s forehead. A gleam of red played around her fingers. Tony narrowed his eyes, interested. Wanda glared at him and looked back down at Pietro. “You’ll be fine.”

“His injury is grave,” Loki said flatly. “Without the cradle, it is likely he would die. It is a miracle he even survived to get here. Why did you not find medical treatment before finding us?”

“I can’t coerce an entire hospital,” Wanda said.

“Yes, you could,” Loki said. “At full strength.”

Wanda blinked.

The elevator opened. Loki moved Pietro briskly towards Helen’s lab space, not giving Wanda a chance to respond.

She exchanged a suspicious glare with Tony and went after her brother.

Up ahead, Bruce yanked open the door and stuck his head into the hallway. “Good, you’re here. Cradle’s ready.” He held the door open and Loki guided Pietro through the opening, rushing in to help rather than holding it for Wanda and Tony.

The door slammed shut.

Tony blinked.

_Flying. Firing. Death like orange flowers blooming from his suit. For the Chitauri, for the people in the buildings around them, because despite his best efforts he is doing damage. Breath rasps in his dry throat and his quick, desperate conversation with JARVIS echoes metallicly in his helmet._

_He’s afraid. He wants it to stop. He never asked to be in a war zone. He does not want to die. But he can’t not risk his life because he can help and therefore has to._

Someone was touching his forehead lightly.

“Stark?”

Tony reflexively grabbed the person’s hand. Twisted it and brought his other fist around in a chop for a pressure point on the person’s neck–

Only to find it stopped by a tingling pressure.

He blinked, hard, then shook his head.

Wanda Maximoff stood in front of him, glaring, red light dancing around her right hand as she held his left fist in her telekinetic power. Tony still had a death grip on her other arm, twisting it into a position that had to hurt.

He released her quickly. Yanked both hands back as if he’d been burned. He tasted bile. It had been–a while–since he had a flashback like that. He resisted the urge to go curl up in a corner away from people and loud noises and lights and just disappear into his own mind for a while. It was strong but not as overwhelming as it had been a few months ago.

“Are you… all right?” Wanda said hesitantly.
“Never better,” Tony said, stuffing it all away beneath flippancy. Swallowing the guilt and grief and fear. “Don’t touch me again. I don’t like people in my head.”

Wanda was silent.

He stalked past her into the lab, ignoring everything but the cradle and Helen and Jane swarming around it, the blue light-beam playing over Pietro’s wound and Loki and Bruce nearby.

Wanda went right up to the side of the cradle and took her brother’s hand.

He smiled up at her through the pain. “Looks like–I’ll be good as new,” he said.

She murmured something to him in another language.

Helen’s head jerked up. “Jane–power readouts–”

“Got it,” Jane said, fingers flying over a screen on the left side of the cradle.

“Your metabolism is off the charts,” Helen said with detached wonder. She pulled down another screen. “He’s–he’s healing around the regenerated cells. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“I’m one of a kind,” Pietro said with a smirk aimed just at Helen.

She gave him a pitying look. “Play in your own league.”

Tony choked on a laugh. Bruce snorted and poked Pietro’s foot. “Nice try.”

“You know, I think–that hurt more than getting shot,” Pietro got out with a rueful grin.

At least the kid could take it.

Darcy slipped through the door, followed by Steve.

Tony thought about Wanda marching up the stairs, blasting doors to get her brother medical help, to warn them about Fury. He needed to know the rest of it–what Fury was planning, what his next move was. Wanda’s abilities were useful. Even though she couldn’t be trusted. He thought about the way she and Pietro looked at him: like scum, like something hateful. He’d done some digging and still had no idea what he could’ve done to piss them off so much, other than the obvious fact that he’d once made and sold weapons that killed a lot of people, possibly at some point someone the Maximoff twins knew. He thought about the fact that Fury had been in contact with Thanos three years ago. It was an old corruption, an old problem, and–

And if Fury had called in the Chitauri invasion, then–

Tony’s hands curled into fists.

Then Fury was responsible for Pepper’s death.

“Tony?” Darcy asked. “You look like you’re about to kill someone.”

“Where’s Fury?” he demanded, rounding on Wanda.

She had the sense to step back. “I—I don’t know.”

“Nice try.” Tony stepped forward again. “You do know. I don’t give a shit if you’re protecting him, or your loyalties are still split. You’re going to tell me and I’m going to kill him.”

“Pepper died because of Fury,” Tony said. His voice didn’t sound like his own.

Darcy breathed in sharply. “He called in the invasion.”

“Pepper?” Loki asked.

“Tony’s–girlfriend,” Steve clarified. “She died in the Chitauri invasion.”

“Ah. Yes.”

“How did you not know that?” Helen asked him.

“I am not of Midgard, remember?” Loki said, and the smile he turned on Helen, even through his disguise, was predatory and threatening. She didn’t back down.

Tony watched them as if through a video feed. Distant. “Tell me where he is,” he demanded.

Wanda shook her head. There was something genuine on her face, the first thing other than hatred when she looked at him. “I don’t know. I really don’t.” She hesitated. “I wish I could tell you.”

“She is telling the truth,” Loki said.

“How do you know?” Tony sneered.

Loki held his gaze. “You know who I am, Stark. You think I cannot tell truth from lies?”

Okay. Fair point.

Tony glared at Wanda. “If I find out you’re hiding him somewhere–”


Tony tried to still his rage and grief and allowed himself to be led out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

HI!! So. PSA. I found this AMAZING Loki x Reader fic called Of Softer Emotions by WanderingWorldWarrior on this site. PLEASE go read it. I haven't read or liked much character x reader fics in the past but this one is reeeally well done. it's long, it's got excellent writing and a fantastic plot, good smut chapters for those of you who like that kind of thing (heehee), a really great MC and one of the best interpretations of Loki that I've ever read, plus great characterization in general. If anyone's looking for a fic recommendation, go check this one out!!
“Tony?” Steve said.

He didn’t answer.

Steve’s instinct was to rest a hand on Tony’s shoulder, but he suspected it wouldn’t go over well. When Tony got like this, he didn’t like being touched. Steve had noticed before. He stuck to words. “Tony. Hey. Talk to me.”

“He killed Pepper,” Tony said, and he sounded—broken. Compassion and frustration hit Steve in equal measure—the frustration because he felt so damn helpless. “This whole time I—I blamed myself.”

Steve had guessed as much, from what little Sam had passed on about the talks he’d had with Tony. “That’s not true,” he said softly.

“No. Because that invasion never would’ve fucking happened if Fury hadn’t called Thanos here in some—some moronic power play.”

“Even if that wasn’t the case, it still wouldn’t be your fault,” Steve said.

Tony laughed, a bleak, bitter sound. “Did anyone ever tell you how many years we worked together before I got my ass in line and told her how I felt?”

“I’m guessing a lot,” Steve said, trying to lighten things up.

It didn’t work. “You’d guess right. She didn’t take any of my shit. Didn’t cut me any slack, called me on my BS—she was the one good thing in my life for… a long time.

“And when we finally—finally took that step, she didn’t like the Iron Legion. Wanted me safe and at home. She hated being at home, or the office, or the antiques store, and hearing on the radio that Iron Man was out doing something, and knowing I was risking my life. I promised her, no matter what happened as Iron Man, I’d always be there for her first. Always. But when it mattered, I wasn’t there.”

The words seemed torn from Tony’s throat. Somewhere along the way, he’d gone from furious to grieving.

“If anything, it should be my fault,” Steve said. “Or Natasha’s. We were in that area. You were doing a different job. Keeping the perimeter contained. Nat and I were on foot nearest Pepper. It’s more our fault than yours that no one was there.”

“No,” Tony said instantly. “That’s not—you’re not—”

Steve shoved his hands in his pockets. “If we’re not to blame then how does it make sense to blame yourself?”

Tony shut his mouth. Opened it again. Said nothing.
Steve knew irrational guilt was sometimes a symptom of PTSD. He’d never suffered from it, not like Tony or Bucky or some of the people Sam worked with, but he recognized the signs. He knew just hearing the words wouldn’t be enough to fix the problem, but he hoped to God it would help.

“Blame Fury,” he said. “But never you.”

“Thanks,” Tony muttered, looking down and to the side. “I, uh. Should probably–there’s some stuff I need to take care of.”

“Right,” Steve said. “I’ll let the rest of the team know to leave you alone for a bit.”

Tony studied him for a long second. “I’m really glad you’re not the guy in my dad’s stories, you know,” he said, and then shrugged away from Steve and strolled away down the hallway.

Steve remembered wondering, at some point, when and why a man in Tony Stark’s position had had to learn how to throw up such a quick and convincing facade of being okay. He had his own mistakes, and that was one of them–that he’d jumped to conclusions so quickly.

But the past couldn’t be changed. Steve wouldn’t let himself regret. He could only keep moving. Try to do better.

He had a team now, again, of good people. Tony. Bruce. Darcy and Nat and Sam and his best friend Bucky back from the dead and even, somehow, Loki. He wouldn’t repeat his mistakes. Wouldn’t slip back into the pride and blind loyalty he’d led with in the forties.

Steve was a different person. And this was a very different war.
Chapter 135

Chapter Notes

The other chapter was short, so here's another before I go to bed.

Also, guys, I'm writing this one scene right now that's super intense and there's Darcy and Loki moment in it and also a televised fight and Darcy being badass and ugh I can't wait to get there!!

Avengers Tower

March 2012

“Your brother’s fine,” Darcy said. “Or will be. Helen’s keeping an eye on him. Tell me the rest of your intel. What’s Fury planning next?”

“Give me a guarantee that my brother and I will remain free and I’ll tell you,” Wanda countered.

Loki narrowed his eyes and sent more strength into the rune-wards he’d placed the second Tony announced her arrival, wards that would bind her power quickly and savagely if she tried to move much more than a pencil. He hadn’t been nearly as kind in the crafting of the binding this time; it seemed far more likely that any sudden surge of power from her would be in pursuit of a surprise attack and he was taking no chances.

“Done,” Darcy said.

“I don’t trust you.”

Darcy snorted. “Smart woman. Fine, here, Bruce, make her a promise. He’s the trustworthy one,” she said conspiratorially to Wanda. “Him and Mr. Star Spangled Man with a Plan.”

Wanda glanced toward Loki, as she’d been doing frequently throughout the whole… scenario. Loki and Vision, really, had both drawn her attention, though Vision had had the sense to remain upstairs. Loki still did not trust him, mostly because he didn’t understand him, and was firmly convinced that keeping a sentient infinity stone in a human-created body in the same room as a mind reader given enhancements by said stone was a terrible idea.

Darcy noticed the look. Her eyes narrowed.

Steve slipped back into the room, followed by Natasha and Clint. Bucky, Tony, and Vision remained elsewhere.

“We won’t confine you,” Bruce said steadily. “You’re safe here. Pietro will be treated and if you want to leave–”

“–you’ll have to convince us you’re not going to run straight to Fury, but I’m not overly concerned because we haven’t actually told you anything important yet,” Darcy finished. “So. Spill. Friday, record this.”
Wanda bit her lip and glanced in the direction Helen and Jane had wheeled Pietro on his table. Helen had made it very clear that Pietro had to lie still for at least another hour or the regenerated cells might not fuse properly with his body. Something to do with his strange and vastly enhanced metabolism. “I…” She took a deep breath. “Since Fury and Thanos’ original plan failed… they’ve been in contact a few times. Thanos is coming back, and he has a new weapon with him—I don’t know exactly what, but he’s told Fury that it’s immensely powerful. That be believes you’ll never withstand its might. With the Tesseract back on Asgard, he can’t make a portal, but they’re still coming.”

“How long?” Darcy asked.

Wanda hesitated.

“There are ways other than a Tesseract–fueled portal to travel between the realms,” Loki said, thinking back to the many times he had created small, temporary portals. “It is known as worldwalking, and there are few enough beings with the power and ability to do so that it is unlikely Thanos found one strong enough to move an army all at once.”

“So he’ll be, what, in spaceships?” Steve asked. “Asteroids with rockets on the back?”

“Space dragons?” Clint added.

“Space dragons are far too difficult to tame,” Loki said in a deadpan voice.

Clint blinked.

Darcy snorted. “He’s messing with you, Legolas.”

Loki smiled at her, slightly, before he could stop himself. Then mentally slapped himself on the forehead and continued. “I would surmise that he has either found a small rent between worlds, a glitch in spacetime, as you might think of it, or he is using several beings who can worldwalk to bring his army through piece by piece. If that is the case, he can be expected to have already begun.”

“But if this weapon is so powerful, why not just use that?” Natasha asked.

“Saving it for us?” Darcy suggested. “Or it’s a once-and-done sort of thing, and he doesn’t want to waste it?”

“I suspect it is an infinity stone,” Loki said. “In which case, our task just became much more difficult.”

Steve frowned. “What does he want?” he asked Wanda. “What’s his goal?”

“His goal is… to rule.” Wanda shrugged. “But it’s not so simple. He believes he is saving the world—that Thanos will flatten Earth and kill all of us unless Fury saves only some. He believes it will be better for humanity if he controls everyone.”

“Better that we all live under the thumb of a mass-murdering psycho?” Clint said in disbelief.

Wanda flinched. Barely, but Loki caught it. “Ah,” he said. “There it is. The rift. You are no longer as sure of your decision, are you? No longer certain it was entirely of your own will.”

“You know nothing about me,” Wanda snapped.

Loki let his lips curl. “I know what it’s like to doubt yourself. I know what it’s like to wonder how
much control you really had. I know what it’s like to live suspecting something reached into your mind and rearranged your thoughts like furnishings. If I am incorrect, do inform me, and I shall apologize and be on my way.”

“You’re wrong,” she said immediately.

He laughed. “Excuse me. I ought to have clarified—you must tell me I am incorrect in a way I will believe.”

She glared.

“Ohhh-kay,” Darcy said. “Not that I want to interrupt this riveting little drama, but is there anything else you can tell us, sparkles?”

“Sparkles?” Wanda said.

Loki choked on a laugh, the sound so quiet that only Clint, standing nearest him, heard.

“She nicknames everyone, don’t take it personally,” Natasha drawled. Loki suspected she was deliberately not mentioning the fact that the nicknaming was a shared joke between Darcy and Tony Stark.

“I… okay. Um. Well, he hates you,” Wanda said. “And it’s going to happen within the next year. I think.” She shrugged. “That’s really all I can tell you.”

There was something else there…

“You’re uncomfortable,” Clint said.

“Hiding something,” Loki agreed. “What is it?”

“Nothing.”

He smirked. “Liar.”

“Nothing to concern you,” she said, flexing her fingers.

“Careful,” Natasha said. “Wouldn’t want us to take that as a threat.”


Steve moved on, asking Wanda more questions about the impressions she’d gleaned from Fury’s mind, but Loki wasn’t really paying attention. He could recover the relevant information for military strategizing from the artificial intelligence’s recordings. For now, what interested him more was Wanda’s secret.

Loki’d already established there was little these two didn’t share and less they were unaware of between them. And Pietro was apparently on a sedative, as Helen had tersely ordered Bruce to find for her, in order to keep him still long enough for the cradle’s regenerated cells to fuse with his previous body tissues.

Sedatives had a way of erasing inhibitions.

Loki resolved to have a private chat with Pietro Maximoff as soon as possible.
Chapter 136

Avengers Tower

March 2012

“Dr. Foster?”

“Seriously, call me Jane.”

“Yes, Jane. I understand that JARVIS was running a series of calculations for you on the genetic analysis of Loki’s blood work?” Friday asked.

Jane perked up, looking away from the reams of data Selvig had sent her from a gravitational anomaly in Mexico the previous week. She’d almost forgotten about that in the chaos surrounding the transfer of JARVIS’ operations to Friday’s not-quite-as-practiced control. “And?”

“Your intuition appears to have been correct,” Friday said. “I apologize for the delay. JARVIS’ data was corrupted and I had to begin the analysis anew, but the results are conclusive. Loki’s blood work does not appear to fit natural dispersion algorithms extrapolated from the relation of Thor’s genetics to those of a typical human.”

Jane wasn’t one hundred percent sure on the implications of that conclusion, but she was one hundred percent sure it needed to be brought to Bruce’s attention. Possibly Helen’s, except that would require some complicated maneuvering, since Helen didn’t and couldn’t know Loki’s real identity. It was the unanimous opinion of the Avengers that, while she’d been nothing but helpful and got on well with almost all of them, she was too new and unknown to be trusted with that information. Jane hoped that would change eventually—she’d come to enjoy working with her one-time rival—but for now she understood the others’ hesitations.

“What does that mean?” Jane asked Friday. “Compared to other blood work.”

“I can’t say,” Friday said. “The discrepancy is too subtle to mean anything certain, and we have no other comparison to an offrealm strain of life to draw a conclusion.”

“Best guess?” Jane asked.

“I do not guess.”

“Then, uh, what’s the most plausible interpretation?” Jane said, hoping that would work around the AI’s limitations against the apparently all-too-human art of guesswork.

“There is a seventeen percent chance that the sample itself was corrupted somehow and a forty-one percent chance that the analysis is flawed due to the fact that we still don’t fully understand the molecular structure of Asgardian genetic material. While similar to that of humans, it is different enough to cause trouble for the mass spectrometer[HCH1]. However, since Thor’s blood work has been analyzed multiple times by SHIELD and Stark Industries without issue, I calculate an eighty-nine percent chance that someone has tampered with the file since it was created.”

Jane froze. Her grip on Erik’s papers tightened. “Any idea who?”

“None. Camera feeds are backed up for the last three years in the Tower, and while those from the lab are focused on the doors and accessible only to a few, they do track all comings and goings. No
one has entered or exited the labs at anything other than the designated times.”

“The most likely candidate is Loki,” Jane said quietly. She remembered how resistant he’d been to the idea of having his blood drawn. She’d have to talk to Darcy and Tony to be sure—they were both better judges of people than she was—but it had seemed totally believable that Loki wouldn’t want them drawing his blood for the simple fact that they were technically enemies at the time. Maybe there was more to it.

But what could he possibly be hiding?

“Tell Bruce and Tony about this,” Jane said at last. “I think Tony’s still in his rooms and Bruce is with Helen and the Maximoff boy—what’s his name again?”

“Pietro,” Friday supplied.

“Right, him.” It had been a few hours since the showdown with the twins and Jane was already a little exhausted by the thought of juggling their various secrets from two more people, who it seemed would be staying in the tower for the foreseeable future. Though Clint, Steve, and Friday had hashed out an agreement in Tony’s absence that put them on the floor below the labs instead of up with the rest of the Avengers. They had some things they couldn’t tell Helen, some things Darcy didn’t want Jane to pass on—those secrets were the friend kind, not the security-of-the-world kind—and now another level of secrecy to deal with. “We can talk about it later, but… they should know.”

“I predict that Miss Lewis might wish to be informed as well,” Friday said.

Jane hesitated. “Um. Let’s not, for now.” Darcy was stressed—she’d confided in Jane only the night before that beyond Sabina Prescott and a few other people, the Avengers had almost no support in the United Nations—and this would only add to her plate. “I’ll talk to Tony and Bruce and figure out what exactly is the problem, and then we can bring Darcy in on it. And let Loki know we’ll need him in the lab a lot in the next few weeks.”

“You got it.”

“Got what?”

Jane jumped, dropped her papers, and squatted down to pile them up, blushing. “Helen. Hi. Just…”

“Dr. Foster was requesting that I contact Dr. Selvig’s offices for a clarification regarding the data he recently sent over,” Friday said.

Jane wondered whether she should be impressed or embarrassed that apparently the AI could lie quicker and better than she could.

“This data?” Helen asked, bending down to help Jane stack the papers. Her movements were quick. Efficient. Jane made herself stop staring at Helen’s hands and took the papers, bumping them back into a neat stack.

“Yeah, this data—there was a gravitational anomaly they found down in Mexico last week and Erik sent it to me for my interpretation, but some of it’s not completely clear.”

“What about it?” Helen asked.

Crap. Jane should’ve seen that coming. Helen was inquisitive and sharp-minded and just as ferociously curious as Jane herself, which meant she took as distinct an interest in Jane’s work as Jane took in hers. Normally this was an engaging and mind-broadening exchange of expertise, but
Jane couldn’t fake a convincing problem with the data in ten seconds.

“It’s—hard to explain,” she said. “I’ll tell you later, when we have time for forty minutes of quantum physics. How’s Pietro?”

“Incredible,” Helen said.

For a second, Jane thought she meant—

“His metabolism is easily ten times as fast as a normal person’s,” Helen continued. “I suppose it would have to be—I can’t imagine how many calories he has to consume. If Stark plans to keep him here long, he’ll have to double the food budget. And he processes sensory input so quickly. I never would’ve believed it if I hadn’t seen the readings myself.”

Of course her fascination was purely scientific. Jane wasn’t sure why she’d ever thought anything else. Or why she would care.

“Wait, Pietro let you take readings?” she asked. “Of his cognitive functions?”

Helen smirked. “I may have told him it was a necessary part of healing wounds with the cradle. He’s bright, but he’s never been through med school—I spit out some last-night-before-it’s-due essay jargon, sixty percent of which went over his head, and ran some quick scans. Nothing invasive, and it does help me understand his physiology, which will help heal him—but it was fascinating.”

“I’d love to see the readouts,” Jane said. “Might need help understanding.”

“Of course. He’s resting right now, with Bruce to watch and mildly sedated because a side effect of his ability seems an inability to keep still for long, so the fusion between old cells and new can complete. But I can find the data for you.”

“Brilliant.” Jane set Erik’s papers aside to go over later and followed Helen down the hall to her own lab.
“I leave for a few days and you somehow pick up another two strays?” Sam groused.

“Technically, we could call you one of those strays,” Natasha retorted.

Steve’s face did the froglike expression he got when he was trying to hide a smile.

“Very funny,” Sam said. “At least I have somewhere else to go.”

“So do the twins,” Darcy said, coming into the penthouse. She looked frazzled, which surprised Sam more than a little. So far he’d gotten a vibe that she not only rarely got frazzled but also hated showing it on the occasion that she did. “Or at least, I’m sure Wanda could find someone to put them up.”

“And convince them,” Maria muttered. She and Clint followed on Darcy’s heels.

“Whoa, impromptu meeting?” Sam asked. “Because I’m not ready to take notes.”

“If anyone’s taking notes on these things, it’d be me,” Darcy said. “And no, they’re just following along because we decided it’s about time we continued the education of our various culturally deprived friends with the amazingness that is Pirates of the Caribbean. It’s movie night.”

Sam looked outside. “It’s only seven-thirty. Sun’s not even down.”

“I’m sure we can find something else to do afterward,” Darcy said.

He shrugged, conceding the point. Sam was pretty sure Darcy was doing this partly for her own sake—to relax—and he wasn’t going to get in the way of that.

“Is everyone coming?” he asked.

“They’re on the way. I had Friday pass on the word.” Darcy started digging around for popcorn. Maria and Clint headed over to the couch, followed by Steve and Bucky and Natasha, who’d been loitering while Sam made himself a late dinner. He’d had a long drive home from business in New Jersey, and fast food had sounded distinctly less appealing than homemade pasta. He stirred the pot, decided it was done, and poured it through a strainer over the sink.

Over the hiss of steam, he asked, “Where’s Tony?”

Darcy winced. “He had a bit of an… episode… earlier.”

“Episode?” Sam asked, running back over Tony’s PTSD symptoms. He wouldn’t have passed them on to anyone, of course, though Steve, Darcy, and Bucky had all probably picked up on a few things, perceptive as they were. Guilt, nightmares, insomnia, flashbacks usually triggered by loud noises or sudden physical contact from someone he hadn’t been totally aware of, and the ever-present conviction that he carried the team’s future on his shoulders alone. They’d made a lot of progress despite the fact that Tony seemed pathologically resistant to conceding any kind of vulnerability to anyone. Sam had mostly made educated guesses and stuck to nonthreatening general terms, then put Tony onto some online resources that wouldn’t require him to admit anything to
anyone but himself. Tony had been more cooperative than Bucky, but since he also came with a few hundred pounds of emotional baggage and trust issues on top of PTSD, he’d still been one of Sam’s more challenging cases. For Tony’s sake, Sam hoped this wasn’t a sign of too big a setback.

“He seemed a little rattled coming into the lab,” Darcy admitted quietly. The group over on the sofas by the TV was getting loud enough to cover their conversation. Sam shifted a little closer while he checked on his meatballs and pasta sauce. “Tense and on edge. Then he realized—when Wanda told us Fury called the invasion of New York… that it was Fury’s fault Pepper died. He flipped out a little bit. I’m pretty sure Steve talked him down but he’s been holed up in his rooms ever since.”

“I did what?” Steve asked, joining them.

Sam twitched. He’d never figured out how such an imposing person could move so quietly. Then again, he’d been pretty damn dialed in to Darcy’s story.

“Talked Tony down. Yo, is there going to be enough pasta for me? I’ve been on the phone for three hours, never had time for dinner,” Darcy said.

“Sure.” Sam dished her up a plate—he’d made plenty of extra, since most of the Avengers seemed incapable of maintaining a steady meal plan and often only realized they needed food when they saw someone cook it. “Steve, if you don’t mind me asking, what’d you say to him?”

Steve’s jaw worked. “He blames—blamed—himself for Pepper’s death. And then switched that to Fury when Wanda told us… told us what really happened.”

“Oh shit,” Sam said, eyes wide. “I—suspected he blamed himself for that, but… well, he’s not the sharing type. He never said as much.”

“Makes no sense to blame himself,” Darcy muttered. “I mean, it’s definitely Fury’s fault, but why did he blame himself before and not Thanos?”

“No one ever said PTSD was rational,” Sam said sharply. “I mean, it’s definitely Fury’s fault, but why did he blame himself before and not Thanos?”

She winced, squeezed her eyes shut, and rubbed a hand over them. “Shit. I’m sorry, that’s—not what I meant. I know he’s had a tough time of it, I wasn’t—trying to downplay anything. I get it.”

There was a pause.

“Long day?” Sam asked, offering an olive branch.

She took it. “You have no idea. Those fuckers on the UN will be the death of my sanity, I swear.”

“Whoa, keep it PG, we’ve got the Captain here,” Sam said with a grin.

Steve rolled his eyes. “That’s not going away anytime soon.”

“Not sure why you ever expected it to,” Sam said. “At least you’re not blond.”

Darcy snorted.

“How long is Loki going to leave that prank in place?” Sam asked.

“How do you know it’s Loki?” Darcy said.

“Seriously? Who else?”
She grinned. “Fair point. I honestly have no clue.”

“How?” Sam said, his skepticism clear.

Darcy narrowed her eyes.

“Speaking of Loki, what’s going on between you two?” Steve asked.

Darcy’s expression went from teasing to lockdown in a heartbeat. “What do you mean?”

“I… just…” Steve shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “You seem… tense around each other. And you’re closer to him than anyone else.”

“He’s gotten close to Natasha and Clint and Bruce,” Darcy said.

This was technically true, but Sam had been keeping an eye on Loki since he still didn’t know how to feel about the guy, and he definitely pinned at least half his attention on Darcy anytime they were in the same room. The few times his expression had slipped and revealed something, Sam had gotten the impression that he was decidedly not feeling platonic things about Darcy. She was evading.

Steve knew it, too. “Yeah, but a few times it seemed like… there was something more between you two,” he said.

Darcy’s expression bypassed closed-off and went all the way to frigid. A defense mechanism, and also probably a result of her tough day and bad mood. “You’re wrong,” she said coldly. “And it really wouldn’t be any of your business even if you weren’t.”

She grabbed her plate of pasta, even though Sam hadn’t added the sauce yet, and stalked over the sofas.

“Nicely handled,” Sam said sarcastically.

“Shut up,” Steve said halfheartedly.

Sam really hoped the movie night would be able to get everyone to relax. And that Tony would show up—it would keep him from spiraling too far down into his own head.

Actually, Sam should probably go roust him from his rooms.

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**Avengers Tower**

**March 2012**

Wanda flexed her fingers, sending all fifty-two cards in the deck flipping through the air until they made the shape of a three-dimensional horse.

“Not bad,” Pietro said.

“Be quiet,” she said with a slight smile. It felt foreign and good to smile for the first time in several days. “This is progress.”

He nodded. “Just wish I could get up and play with it.”
“Don’t you dare,” Wanda warned. “I’ll pin you to the bed if I have to.” Dr. Helen Cho’s warnings still rang in her ears about keeping Pietro resting, at least on the couch. The scientist was cold and intimidating and had told them in no uncertain terms that his unique physiology added unusual complications to the process.


“I exhausted myself getting you here, I’m not going to let your impatience open that wound back up,” Wanda retorted. She cocked her head and focused and made a jellyfish instead of a horse, tentacles waving gently in an imaginary current. “Also, I’m not getting on Helen Cho’s bad side.”

Pietro paused. “What do you think of them?”

“Surprisingly welcoming,” Wanda said grudgingly. “But they could be listening.”

“We made them promise no surveillance in here,” he reminded her.

“And suddenly you trust the Avengers?”

Pietro propped himself up on his elbows, face turning serious. “Wanda. What they said—about the scepter—”

“It’s not true,” she said instantly.

“What if it is?” He took a deep breath. “I know you’re feeling doubts too.”

She took a shuddering breath, hands frozen in midair. He wasn’t wrong.

But if they were wrong to dislike the Avengers—or at least to dislike them—then she didn’t know what was left for them.

“We let Hydra do this to us so we could fight these people,” Wanda said at last.

“And they took us in without hesitation. Healed me. They haven’t trapped us,” Pietro shrugged. “I suppose… I’m saying they’re not so bad as we thought. And Romanoff didn’t want to hand us over to the United Nations.”

Wanda closed her eyes. “Pietro, I… I already don’t trust my control over my powers,” she said quietly. It was hard to get the words out but this was her brother. They didn’t keep secrets, and they didn’t judge. “I can’t not trust my own decisions, too.”

“And then what?” he challenged. “What if we keep going down this path—take off, disappear, keep fighting the Avengers? They go up against Hydra. They’re not going to let Fury get away with this, or stand by while this Thanos person takes over Earth. We either fight them, and help Hydra in the process, or we sit on the sidelines with popcorn while someone else fights for the people on this planet?”

Wanda winced.

“I can’t fight,” she whispered. “Not—I could barely get us away from Fury.”

“So train.” Pietro shrugged. “The gem gave me abilities that are easier to control than yours, but that doesn’t mean you can’t do it. With practice.”

“And who do I practice on?” she demanded. “Who knows how to help me?”
Pietro rolled his eyes. “You’re in denial. You know exactly who can help you. And he already
offered to teach you once.”

Her heart sank. “The Magician.”

“Liam Hillworth,” Pietro mused. “He’s kind of scary, I’m not going to lie.”

“I wonder where they found him.”

“Presumably on Earth,” Pietro said drily.

“Very funny,” she said. “I meant—how he ended up here. With them. What his history with Thanos
is. He’s been controlled mentally before. The scepter, I think.”


“Yes?” she said, and then she realized her card jellyfish had unconsciously been morphed into the
shape of the Hydra logo.

She flinched.

All fifty-two cards thudded to the ground.

And of course, that was the moment someone knocked on their door.
“May I come in?”

Pietro scowled at the intruder. “If we say no, will you go away?”

Liam Hillworth smirked. “No.”

“Figures.” Pietro slumped back on the sofa, feeling loose and melodramatic. Part of him knew this was the sedative and that he shouldn’t be talking to Liam Hillworth when he was drugged, but the bigger part didn’t care. “This whole day’s just been one thing after another.”

“I would not complain so readily,” Hillworth said, stepping in and closing the door behind himself. “You have been taken in by those you once swore to overthrow, healed, and given a place of refuge.”

“And you’ve been given a Charles Dickens character’s speech patterns,” Pietro noticed. “Seriously, where did the Avengers find you?”

“I found them,” Hillworth said simply. Pietro didn’t like the way he glanced around their small set of rooms, as though he was cataloguing it for potential weapons, or the calculating way he examined first Wanda and then Pietro himself.

“And where did you come from?” Wanda said. She was watching Hillworth like a lynx might a mountain lion—they were both predators, but everyone knew who in this room was at the top of the food chain. “Not Earth.”

“No,” Hillworth agreed.

They waited.

He didn’t elaborate.

“What are you doing here?” Pietro asked finally. “I’m supposed to be resting.”

“You are perfectly capable of talking, evidently,” Hillworth said with a cutting smile. “Which works out quite well, as I came to ask you a question.”

“No.”

“But you haven’t even heard the question yet,” Hillworth said.

Wanda stepped in between them. “Please leave.”

“Tell me what you were hiding,” Hillworth said to her.

She flinched. A tiny movement, but Pietro knew his sister’s every tic and breath, and he caught it. Hillworth’s eyes flickered—he’d seen it too. The man was incredibly perceptive.

“I’m not hiding anything,” Wanda said.
Hillworth looked at Pietro. “What did she not tell us about your… altercation… with Fury?”

“She… is not hiding anything,” Pietro said, wanting to slap himself. He’d almost spilled. Damn drugs. Hillworth was clever; he’d probably come when Pietro was medicated on purpose.

And he was observant enough to notice the slip. “You are both keeping a secret,” he mused.

“Why do you care?” Wanda demanded. Going on the offensive. Pietro approved with the minority of his brain cells that he could even make concentrate on this conversation. The majority were occupied thinking about how he could run through downtown Manhattan with several cans of silly string and get it all over the place. “You’re keeping secrets as well.”

“I’m afraid you have this situation reversed,” Hillworth said coldly. “I am not here to gain your trust; I am here to see if I can trust you. You are keeping secrets and you occupy a position in this covert conflict that means those secrets could bring significant harm to my teammates.”

“It’s nothing that could harm them,” Wanda snapped.


Crap.

Wanda whipped around and glared at him.

“Ah,” Hillworth said, leaning forward with glittering eyes. “Your brother seems to disagree, Miss Maximoff. Care to elaborate?”

“No.”

Something in the set of Hillworth’s face made Pietro think, suddenly, that they weren’t seeing him as he really was. That this face didn’t match the expression. But that was stupid—how could he be wearing a false face?

It must just be the weirdness of the fact that he was not human, and honestly, pretty terrifying.

“Do not challenge me, Wanda Maximoff,” Hillworth said coldly.

Wanda stood up, facing him, her back to Pietro. But he didn’t need to see her face to know her thoughts: they were twins, they were linked by birth and by the power of the gem, that was just how it worked. She was furious and afraid. Her hands were fisted, and Pietro knew it was so they didn’t tremble.

So she didn’t accidentally do something like flatten a forest.

“Get out,” she snapped.

Hillworth cocked his head. “If you wish me to leave, you will have to force me, or tell me what you are hiding.”

Wanda moved fast like an asp, the way Strecker taught her. Taught both of them, really. Pietro’s mind got stuck on blurry memories of their training, of practicing in adjoining glass-walled cells at night (and wasn’t that proof that they hadn’t really been part of Hydra? Cells? Really?), and it took him a few seconds to realize that a wall of red power had swept through the room, torn open the door and thrown a StarkPad from the desktop into the wall, but Hillworth remained unmoved.

“Better,” he said, teeth gleaming. “But you yet have no finesse.”
“I’ll show you finesse,” Wanda gritted, and crooked her fingers, pulling.

Hillworth’s eyes widened.

Pietro knew that gesture. It slipped away from him, where he’d seen it before, but he knew Hillworth felt Wanda tugging on his beating heart.

With a word, the Magician froze her.

Pietro lunged to the side. He was clumsy and slow, but he could reach her—

“Stay put,” Hillworth said, waving a hand idly. Pietro felt himself shoved not ungently back onto the sofa and held. “She’s not harmed.”

He spoke again, and Wanda sagged, gasping.


Hillworth laughed. “How original. I believe I have it now,” he said to Wanda. “You lost control. You showed Fury your hand and wasted too much strength on your escape, so you compelled a few people at a time instead of a hospital in its entirety, to come here. And you do not want to concede this weakness to your enemies.”

Wanda looked away.

Hillworth examined them both for a long moment.

“I am not of Earth,” he said softly. “I have traveled worlds you could not imagine, seen things wilder than your worst nightmares or most delirious dreams, and I have lived three times through a moment when the threads of fate are in flux. This is a turning point, not just for Midgard but for all the realms, and like it or not, the pair of you have joined the cast of characters who will decide the future.”

“Sounds… dramatic,” Pietro said.

Hillworth smiled unkindly. Pietro thought distantly that most people smiled when they were happy but the Magician seemed to use them as weapons. “You are not wrong.”

He turned to leave.

“Aren’t you worried?” Wanda said. She’d recovered from the shock of being bested by Hillworth, and Pietro felt her anger coming back. “You’ve got a loose cannon living ten floors below your precious teammates.”

“If you try to give any of them so much as a hangnail with that power of yours, you will find it bound much less gently than the last time,” Hillworth said without turning. “I am not concerned. Frankly, I expected something much more dramatic than this—I was already aware of your struggle for control.”

He opened the door. Stepped through.


It was about all he could manage, but she understood.

“Teach me,” Wanda blurted.
“You said... in Sokovia. That you could teach me to use my power,” Wanda said. “To control it. I was in Fury’s mind and I couldn’t stop myself from—giving him his worst nightmare.”

“What was it?” Hillworth asked instantly.

Wanda hesitated. Pietro knew what she was thinking because he was thinking it too: she could keep it to herself, and use the information as leverage—or tell Hillworth, and hope to gain his trust.

He pushed honesty at her. Hillworth wasn’t one of the leaders here—he was a lone wolf who’d temporarily joined the pack—but that didn’t mean he was unimportant. Quite the opposite. Pietro still hated Tony Stark, but things were getting more muddled the longer he spent away from Hydra and the one thing he knew for certain was that they couldn’t let Fury’s vision for the world come true. Even if that meant making a deal with the devil. And if they were going to fight by the Avengers’ side, they’d have to get Hillworth to accept them.

“I only got a flash of it,” Wanda said. “He was locked in a cell. And he was overwhelmingly powerless. Helpless.”

Hillworth’s eyes narrowed. Pietro could practically see his clever mind turning that information over, adding it to a mental database that probably contained potential blackmail and manipulation data on everyone he knew. “How useful,” he mused. “And I suppose I did offer my expertise.”

“You did,” Pietro said. He propped himself up again and this time Wanda didn’t scold him for moving.

“I will keep my word.” Hillworth nodded decisively. “I will help you gain control, Miss Maximoff, and in return you will prove that you won’t turn on the Avengers the second we have beaten Fury and Thanos back. If you earn my trust...” He shrugged and turned to go. “I can teach you far more than simply controlling yourself.”

The door slammed shut behind him.

“Is it just me, or is he the biggest drama queen we’ve ever met?” Pietro said.

Wanda choked on a laugh.

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*March 2012*

“Index,” Steve reminded her.

Darcy readjusted her grip on the gun to keep her index finger outside the trigger guard.

“There you go.” He stepped back and examined her stance. “Not bad. Bend your knees a little more, tilt your torso forward—there you go. Lean into the recoil.”

He’d had to repeat the same message several times in the last hour. Darcy was many things, but a natural at shooting wasn’t on the list. But it was still fun. She was focused and took criticism well, which Steve could definitely *not* say for a lot of the people he’d trained in the past. Her accuracy had
slowly but surely improved.

“Focus on the front sight. Fire when you’re ready.”

Darcy narrowed her eyes but kept them both open the way he’d taught her. She put her finger on the trigger and pulled slowly.

Steve had her shooting a .22 Magnum—it was solid and steady and consistent, with smooth trigger action and great accuracy. And it was his favorite teaching gun of all the modern pistols he’d tried; the low caliber and the weight eliminated most of the recoil, so a shooter could correct their bad habits much easier. He’d tried Darcy on a 9mm Glock twenty minutes in, but she started anticipating the recoil and her accuracy took a nosedive, so he’d started switching back and forth. It helped.

Eight shots later, Darcy had made a respectable effort, a ten-inch spread on a target that was twenty feet away.

“Pretty good. Any more?” Steve said loudly, so she would hear him through her ear protection.

Darcy shook her head, putting the gun down (barrel aimed downrange like he’d taught her) and flexing her hands. “Tired,” she said.

He nodded—frankly, he was impressed a first-timer had lasted a full hour—and helped her pack up the gear, saving further conversation for after they were out of Tony’s private range.

They stepped out of the soundproof door and pulled off their eye and ear protection.

“Solid first effort,” Steve said, grinning at Darcy. He’d forgotten how much fun teaching could be. “You’re anticipating recoil a little—tends to send your shots high and left.”

She made a face, flexing both hands now. “My hands hurt,” she said. “Is that normal?”

“Completely.” He shouldered the bag with several gun safes and ammo boxes; the range was in the middle of the Tower and available for all of Tony’s highly trained private security people, so he couldn’t leave anything here. “You’re new, your hands are small, it’s normal to be tired after an hour. I’m impressed you made it that long.”

“Stubbornness,” Darcy said with a self-deprecating laugh. He was relieved that some of her tension seemed to have bled away in the two days since their movie night—two days in which the Maximoff twins had spent almost all their time in their rooms and Loki and Maria had taken much more active roles in Darcy’s ambassador wrangling. “I wanted to quit like thirty minutes ago.”

“Good job sticking with it,” Steve said. They stepped into the public elevator; it would take them down to the upper lobby, where the much more heavily guarded penthouse elevator had an entrance. The extra security made traveling to mid-levels of the Tower kind of irritating, but Steve knew why it was necessary.

“Can I practice on my own?” Darcy asked.

Steve cocked his head. “Eh… probably best not to, for now. In case the gun jams or something. Plenty of the others will go with you if I’m busy, though. Clint, Natasha, Maria, Sam… Loki.”

For a second, he thought she was going to take him up on the thinly veiled question in his words, but she only said, “You trust Loki with a gun?”

“He’s a quick study. Sam and Natasha and Clint and I have been taking it in turns to coach him for a
while now. And if all else fails, his magic can keep you from shooting yourself in the foot.”

She laughed. It was cut short when her phone dinged.

“Sorry, gotta take this,” Darcy said, all levity dying in an instant. By the time the phone reached her ear, she was all business, and her face was hard as stone. She said a greeting in a language Steve didn’t recognize and then carried on a fast-paced conversation that went from polite to stiffly polite to annoyed to barely contained anger by the time they reached the penthouse.”

Steve squinted at her. “Need to talk about it?”

Darcy walked away from the elevator. “Somalia just pulled their support for us on the UN,” she said over her shoulder.

The penthouse was empty. Darcy’s schedule had gotten so crazy the last week that she kept weird hours; everyone else must be in bed. Steve checked the clock and realized it was almost midnight.

“That’s not good, is it?” he asked.

“No. No, it’s not.” She sighed heavily and threw herself across a sofa. “Prescott helped me get the vote delayed again, to the end of April again, but I’m afraid it won’t be enough. I was trying to get time to win more nations over to our side, but—” She shrugged.

Steve watched her for a second. Leaning back, eyes closed, she looked young and exhausted.

He walked over to the kitchenette and started rummaging around in the fridge.

When the doors hissed open, Darcy didn’t look up, but Steve did. It was Natasha and Clint and Maria.

“Can’t sleep?” he asked them.

Natasha shook her head. It was the first time he could remember seeing her look genuinely tired.

“Please tell me that’s the cookie dough you’re looking for,” Clint said.

“Yeah, but I can’t find it.”

“If Loki ate it all again—” Maria began.

“Or spelled it to turn us into gophers—”

“He wouldn’t do the same thing twice,” Darcy called from the couch. “Cookie dough’s been done, you’re safe.” She paused. “Except maybe it’ll spray glitter on you when you open it, so be careful.”

There was no glitter. Steve dug it out of the back corner of the fridge—it’d been hidden behind a large bag of mixed greens that someone needed to turn into salad soon—while Clint scrounged up five spoons.

“Best make that seven.”

Steve glanced up. Bucky, Sam, and Loki had joined them.

“You got it,” Clint said without hesitation.

They all settled on the sofa and passed the uncooked dough around in turns.
Natasha, Maria, and Clint discussed their latest operation in low voices; they’d been chasing down a seller of illegal Chitauri tech on the black market. Steve had been on the case for the first few weeks but tapped out to Clint, which meant he’d missed the fire at said black market dealer’s mansion and whatever they’d seen that put those haunted looks on their faces.

The last bite of the dough went to Bucky. Loki put his spoon gently on the table. “I will never fully understand why you even cook it,” he mused.

“It’s so much better cooked!” Bucky protested.

“As are mortals.”

There was a pause.

“By the Norns, I jest,” Loki said irritatedly. “To consume mortal flesh is barely one step removed from cannibalism.”

“Okay,” Darcy said. “So, next time, maybe put like a sarcastic or joking tone in your voice. So we know it’s a joke.”

“I shall endeavor to do so,” Loki said.

Clint rolled his eyes. “I’ll never get used to this.”

“To…”

“Having a god living down the hall? People I like? Your terrible sense of humor? Take your pick.”

“I’m gonna be sick tomorrow,” Darcy said, the satisfaction in her tone completely at odds with her words.

Natasha snorted. “I’ve eaten worse than this.”

“Oooh, drama queen,” Clint said. “Big bad Black Widow, I can dismember someone with my pinky finger, I can survive on vodka and the blood of my enemies—”

Natasha hit him with a pillow to shut him up.

Laughing, Clint ducked and rolled. Maria blocked the next pillow blow and twisted it expertly out of Natasha’s hands, but Clint’s foot went astray and knocked it across the table into Darcy.

“Oh, it’s on,” she said.

The room erupted in a full-scale pillow war in three seconds flat.

Steve instantly grabbed a couch cushion in his right hand and a smaller decorative one in his left. Got into an alliance with Bucky at a glance and they charged the chaotic tussle that was Darcy, Maria, and Clint. He felt goofy and uninhibited in a way he hadn’t in a long time, drunk on the timeless feeling of being high above a city at night and a sugar rush and friendship.

Darcy threw a pillow at Steve’s feet, trying to trip him. He dodged and smacked her on the shoulder. She was laughing. Someone nailed him in the face with a throw pillow; Steve turned and there was Natasha; he launched a pillow attack while Bucky kept after Clint and Maria.

For several minutes, it was chaos. Pillows flew and Steve couldn’t tell if he was laughing or smiling or if his face was just straight excitement. Half the pillows that hit him didn’t seem to have a source;
Then someone shouted “Stop that!” and there was a crash and he turned around just in time to see Darcy tackle Loki over the back of the sofa.

Cackling, Clint rolled over the raised edge of the seat and popped up on the far side, fists raised. “Victory!”

Steve stepped aside to see clearly.

Darcy was laughing so hard she could barely breathe, rolling off of Loki to her feet. The Asgardian just lay on the floor, smirking arrogantly up at all of them, as comfortable as if he were on a four-poster bed and they were invading his room.

“Ohhhh,” Natasha said, still laughing.

“He was—making pillows fly—into all of you,” Darcy got out. There were tears running down her face from laughing too hard. Steve felt his own laughter in his abs. “Making the chaos.”

“It’s what I’m best at,” Loki agreed.

“No wonder ;),” Maria began, and then Bucky yelled something incoherent and threw a couch cushion like a discus. With his hands behind his head, Loki couldn’t block fast enough to keep it from hitting him in the face.

Tony, Vision, and Bruce found them in various stages of helpless laughter. Natasha and Maria were the only people still on their feet.

“What the fuck,” Tony said.

“Pillow fight,” Darcy said, still wiping her face.

Tony snorted. “Wish I could’ve seen that.”

He glanced a little quizzically in Loki and Darcy’s direction. Steve followed his gaze and realized that in the half-darkness he’d missed somehow that after the couch-flipping and in the middle of the delirious laughter, Darcy and Loki had ended up more or less side-by-side. Arms touching. If they turned their heads in they’d basically be kissing.

Darcy seemed to figure it out at the same time. She stood up and grinned at Tony. “So what’s up?”

If he hadn’t been looking for the discomfort, Steve would’ve missed it.

“I found something you need to see,” Tony said. “All of you.”

“Where’s Jane?”

“We already told her and Helen; they’re crashing in the lab.” Bruce toyed with a StarkPad in his hands. “They’re not combat suited anyway.”

“Something from Sokovia?” Steve asked, standing up. Already the strange late-night spell was broken, even though no one had turned any lights on. “You said it was corrupted data.”

“Oh, they deep sixed it all right,” Tony agreed. “But our newest recruit helped me figure out some things that led to some other things that painted a pretty ugly picture.”
He was serious. Not gloating, not using technical language to show off his brilliance. Steve was at a point where he didn’t blame Tony for that—he’d pretty much decided it wasn’t a fault to be proud of your genius, and like opportunities to show it in front of others. Tony was good at science because he’d spent a lifetime learning and experimenting. But this time there was none of that. Straight businesslike manner. That told Steve exactly how serious this was. He reached over and set the sofa upright. By unspoken agreement, they slung cushions back on haphazardly and sat down.

“What did you find?” Maria asked when they were done.

Tony tossed a small black device on the table. It flickered and lit up, projecting a holoview into the air above the table of a familiar face.

“Rumlow,” Sam growled.

Bucky shifted in his seat.

“Enmity,” Loki murmured. “He was involved in Hydra at its fall, yes?”

“Let’s just say I’d love a second shot at that bastard,” Sam said. “I thought he died.”

“Wish he had,” Bruce muttered. “He’s going by ‘Crossbones’ now—”

“Hey, Loki, looks like we have a new challenger for Most Melodramatic,” Bucky said with a grin.

Loki smirked back at him. “Your nervousness is understandable, given that you currently hold that title.”

“Ouch,” Darcy said gleefully.

“Why Crossbones?” This was Maria, always the voice of reason. Steve’s thoughts felt dull and slow. Like quicksand. He was half here and half stuck on the apology he’d wanted to spit out for days to Tony, except whenever he tried it got stuck in his throat.

“He appears to consider himself a pirate,” Vision said. “A lone wolf, operating for Hydra’s objectives but not under their direct command.”

“He’s waving a flag in our faces,” Tony said. “Literally and figuratively. Look.”

The holo changed to a video feed of a man in body armor and a face mask waving a pirate flag at a security camera, then flipping it the bird and vanishing from the frame.

“He wants to draw us out,” Steve said flatly.

“Yes.” Tony fiddled. “That’s not all. We have his next target, and it can’t mean anything good.”

“A government lab in Lagos?” Natasha asked, brow furrowing. “Bioweaponry?”

Tony pointed at her. “Got it in one. We don’t know exactly what their target is, but there’s a lot of shit in that lab that we really do not want in Hydra’s hands.”

“Thank you for the brilliant clarification,” Loki drawled, getting appreciative reactions from Darcy, Clint, and even Bucky.

“No problem.”

“When?” Steve asked.
Tony shifted.

“Tomorrow,” Vision said.
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“That’s what we know about their resources. We leave in an hour,” Steve said, looking around the Avengers sitting at the table. “Any more questions?”

“Yeah,” Clint said. “Are the twins coming?”

“I hadn’t considered it,” Steve said slowly.

Darcy frowned. She’d spoken to Pietro, briefly, when Helen was checking him over the previous day, but other than that they’d spent all their time either in the rooms Tony had set up for them or in the employee cafeteria several floors down. “Do we trust them that much?”

“I can contain them,” Loki said. “If necessary.”

Bruce and Tony exchanged a glance. “You’re staying here,” Bruce said.

Loki looked at him, mostly impassive, but Darcy could tell he was both irritated and surprised. “What conceivable reason could compel you to leave me behind?” he snapped.

Bruce shrugged. “I’m not going either—”

“All the more reason to send Loki,” Clint pointed out, frowning.

“We have some test results that need confirmation,” Bruce said. “We’ve been working with him a lot lately, but it can’t be interrupted. Jane’s data needs to be regularly updated. And we have a lot of work to do on the Infinity Stone that involves picking his brain. For that matter, Vision, we need you as well.”

“Of course,” Vision said. He’d never been heavily involved in the planning, anyway.

Loki had been spending a lot of time down in the lab, when he wasn’t working with Darcy and Maria on the UN mess. More than usual. But Darcy suspected there was something else going on here. She kept her thoughts to herself. Watched Tony and Bruce closely.

“We can manage without you,” Steve said. “If you can make Bucky’s disguise so it lasts when you’re not there?”

“It’s possible,” Loki said slowly. “You are certain?”

“We can handle it,” Tony said. “We were doing shit like this long before you showed up, Reindeer Games.”

“But are you certain you wish to go out in public as Goldilocks?” Loki said, gesturing to Tony’s still-blond hair with a smirk.

Tony’s hand flew to his head. “I kinda like it blond. Maybe I’ll start a fashion trend.”
“Okay, anyway,” Maria said. “Twins?”

“Helen says Pietro can’t do anything strenuous yet,” Bruce said. “She’s having trouble calibrating the cradle to compensate for his metabolism. He’s out.”

“Wanda though…” Tony mused. “She could be helpful.”

“You’re staying here, right?” Steve checked.

Tony sighed. “Board meeting. I can’t get out of it; I’ve already delayed it too much as it is. Being CEO of this company does have some responsibilities.”

“I’ll talk to Wanda,” Clint said.

“I’ll come,” Natasha added.

“Good,” Maria said. “If she even seems like she’s lying, or considering turning on us, we drop her. Someone should bring a tranq gun.”

“Got that covered,” Clint said.

“I’ll get the plane ready, my stuff’s easy to grab,” Bucky said. He, Natasha, Clint, and Maria left together, discussing which weapons to bring, how much fuel to put in the jet, and then something with military jargon that Darcy quit paying attention to. Vision and Bruce left for the elevator that went down to the labs.

Loki murmured the somewhat familiar sounds of a spell. Darcy’d heard him cast this one several times before, but she could never remember the exact shape of the syllables—they slipped out of her head like fish down a waterfall, leaving only a fading impression of quicksilver power. This time, he paired the spell with shapes—runes, he’d said once—traced in the air. Darcy watched closely. Loki had told her how it worked—runes held power in them to extend a spell past the caster’s concentration. How long after depended on how much strength was in them. In just a few seconds, the disguise of Ryan Dessen shimmered into place over Bucky’s features, height, and skin tone. Creepily realistic.

“How long will this last?” Bucky asked.

Loki lowered his hands. “You have about a day, to account for flight time.”

“Thanks,” Bucky said, clapped him on the shoulder, and jogged off with Sam and Steve, headed for the stairs up to the hangar and the armory.

Leaving Darcy with Loki.

“How long will this last?” she asked, boosting herself up onto the counter and kicking her feet.

“I have come to enjoy our raiding parties,” he said. “As an opportunity to practice seidr and leave the Tower. But I am not particularly concerned; they are all capable in combat.”

That’s not what I meant. Darcy leaned to her left and tugged open the fridge; they’d been up all night and it was more or less time for breakfast and—

“Thank god,” she muttered, pulling a bottled iced coffee out of the fridge. “Caffeine.”
Loki’s lips quirked. “One day I shall introduce you to mekkesh,” he said. “The Vanir created it as a stimulant. It’s much more effective than caffeine.”

“Nothing that’ll give me cardiac arrest,” Darcy said. “Mortal bodies are so fragile.” She took a big sip from the bottle and sighed with relief. “Mmm, good coffee.”

“It’s only logical that long-lived beings are more resilient,” Loki mused. “From an evolutionary perspective.”

“Am I going to regret introducing you to biology textbooks? Bio and chem were not my best subjects.”

His smile was quick and bright. “I’ll use... how do you say? Layman’s terms?”

“Yeah, good, your idioms are getting a lot better. Wait. Is this English or Allspeak?”

Loki’s smile widened. “English.”

“Hey, not bad.”

“I am learning German now.”

“Du willst ein Kaffee?”

“Ja, danke,” he said.

“A-plus.” Darcy pulled out another coffee and tossed it to him.

Loki caught the bottle deftly and examined it with more focus than Darcy thought a plain glass bottle of coffee really warranted. “Jane tells me there are scientists searching for ways to make humans immortal,” he said.

“Yeah, people have been trying for pretty much as long as we’ve been around.” Darcy shrugged, trying to play off her interest in this topic.

Loki tasted the coffee, and his eyebrows rose slightly. “This is a pleasant beverage.”

She snorted. “Glad to see Midgard’s not so bad after all.”

“Midgard has never been what I would consider ‘bad’,” Loki said. “Jotunheim is far less pleasant. Muspelheim is worse.”

“Jotunheim. Frost giants.” She remembered Thor talking about this. Or, more accurately, she remembered reading Jane’s notes taken when Thor talked about this only to her. “Thor’s not very fond of those guys.”

“None of the Aesir is,” Loki said, with a dark undercurrent to his voice.

It hit Darcy—the thing that bugged her when he talked about Asgard. He spoke of the Aesir and his family like an outsider even though he was a royal prince. Always *they* or *them*, never *we* or *us* or *my people*. Never *home*. She wondered why—just because he’d been ostracized so much? Or was there another reason?

She decided not to prod. “And Muspelheim?”

“Fire giants.” Loki’s hand moved reflexively.
“What’s the story there?” Darcy asked.

“How do you know there is a story?” he returned.

Darcy rolled her eyes as he hopped up to sit on the counter opposite her. “It wasn’t hard to figure out. You looked like you were remembering something.”

“Clever.” Loki sipped his drink. “You know I often led Odin’s armies, yes?”

“Yep. Sounds dramatic.” Darcy pictured a chaotic jumble of fiery alien soldiers fighting Asgardians and Loki standing on a hill, watching coolly, calling strategy and maneuvers like a football coach.

“I was also a spy.”

Her mental image shattered. “…Makes sense.”

“It does?”

“You can control people’s actions and cast weirdly realistic illusions that let you pretend to be anyone else. If your king didn’t use you as a spy, he’d be an idiot.”

“Idiot,” Loki repeated, and snorted. “He can be. But not in this. I was spying on the Muspellir for him and… may have underestimated the resident mage. She noticed me and stripped my guise. Odin disavowed me. I spent a decade in a Muspellir dungeon before he was able to negotiate my release.” He untucked his dark blue-green button-down shirt. “They returned me to Asgard with a souvenir.”

Darcy stifled a gasp. His flat stomach was as toned and attractive as ever, but covered in a mess of scars. The skin looked melted and swirled together.

“What the fuck?” she squeaked. “And how have I never seen that before?” She’d seen him shirtless in the lab a few times…

He let his shirt hem fall back into place. “I keep a glamour over the scarring most of the time. Too many have pitied me, mocked me, or been revolted by it.”

“What does that?” she demanded, coffee forgotten.

Loki’s eyes grew distant. “Acid.”

She gripped the edge of the counter. “You know, it’s probably a good thing humans aren’t allowed to go to Asgard,” Darcy growled. “I’d be way too tempted to punch Odin in the face. And then Tase him.”

Loki coughed and choked on his coffee. “May I ask why?”

“He left you there,” Darcy said. “His own son.”

“I knew the risks,” Loki said calmly. “When I went to Muspellir, I knew full well what capture would mean. Asgard could not admit to having spied on another realm’s government. We all do it, but never confess.”

“Yeah, but did you have a choice?” Darcy retorted. “Did he say hey, dangerous mission, wanna opt out? Or was it the full kingly GO OR YOU DIE that seems to be his M.O.?”

“I… was ordered.”
“And could you say no?”

Loki’s jaw tensed. “Not without facing charges of treason.”

“I love monarchies,” she said sarcastically, practically humming with indignation. “And he’s your dad!” She paused, then rolled her eyes. “Hey, look at that, we both have terrible fathers.”

“At least yours does not control two billion citizens,” Loki said darkly.

Darcy paused. “You’re not done going after the throne, are you?”

He flinched. Actually flinched.

“Knew it,” Darcy said, grinning. “I knew it—”

“How did you…”

“A hundred little things.” She smirked at him. “You called me out, remember? As the kind of person who wouldn’t walk away from a shot at power like that. You’re the same way.”

Her own words sounded taunting in her head. We’re the same.

Except he was fucking immortal —

And Darcy had thought she was past these stupid emotions.Fuck.

“You’re not wrong,” Loki murmured, seemingly oblivious to her turmoil. “I still desire the Asgardian throne.” His eyes fixed on her. Challenging, calculating, ruthless. “What will you do with this information?”

“What’s it to me if you want to take over?” Darcy said, shrugging. “Honestly, I’m pretty sure you’d be better than Odin. Or Thor.”

Loki opened his mouth. Shut it again.

Darcy raised her eyebrows. “Cat got your tongue?”

“That expression makes no sense,” he muttered.

“I once saw the English language described as four other languages, one of them dead, stacked on top of each other in a trench coat. Most of it doesn’t make sense.”

“Few of the other Midgardian tongues to which I have been exposed are without their inconsistencies.”

“Mmm, fair point.”

Darcy’s phone went off. She glanced down at it and sighed. “I’d better get back to work.”

Her stomach growled.

Loki looked like he was trying not to laugh. “You have not eaten yet?”

“We’ve been up all night,” Darcy said, the lack of sleep slapping her with a wave of irrational grouchingness. She took a breath, mastered herself, finished her point. “Haven’t had a chance yet. The coffee’ll tide me over until I can take a lunch break.”
“I can make food,” Loki offered.

Darcy squinted at him. “What about Bruce and Jane?”

He smirked. “They can wait. I believe I at one point heard you expressing an affection for omelettes?”

“It’s a little creepy how well you know me,” Darcy muttered, and hopped down off the counter. “Yes. Bacon and cheese. Bell peppers aren’t bad either—”

“I can manage,” Loki said.

“You’re the best,” Darcy said unthinkingly. Then realized that was testing the line they’d drawn and blew it off with an innocent smile before heading straight for her office.

Which was safely soundproofed and on the other side of the penthouse.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry this update's been slow! I'm traveling with my best friend at the moment and have had intermittent time to spend on my laptop. I'll probably have another chapter up in the next few days, but I'm not totally sure. I'm still writing, though!
Chapter 140

En Route to Lagos, Nigeria

March 2012

Clint looked around the plane, mentally tracking his teammates plus Wanda.

Bucky twiddling with his arm in the left alcove.

Steve, Maria, Sam, and Natasha in the center, discussing something to do with the satellite images of Lagos being portrayed on a drop-down screen.

And Wanda, in the back. She was on her own, pressed back into the corner and watching them all warily.

Steve and Natasha were both pretending they weren’t watching her like hawks. Clint rolled his eyes. They were not subtle, and also that was his job. Keeping an eye on everyone.

He drummed his fingers on the console. “Friday, take over. Autopilot.”

“Yes, sir,” Friday responded.

Clint stood up and wandered towards the back of the plane.

Natasha met his eyes as he passed, questioning. He shot her a quick smile and she looked back at the satellite pictures, reassured. He nodded to the others talking with them, ignored the snippets of conversation he caught on his way by, and continued to where Wanda was sitting.

She watched him warily as he came closer. She’d probably have tensed except she was already stiff as a board; Clint could see it easily enough in her posture.

“Hi,” he said. “I’m Clint. I don’t think we’ve been introduced.”

“Wanda,” she said.

He stuck out his hand.

Wanda stared at it for a second before she slowly reached out and shook.

Clint grinned and sprawled across the bench across from her, aware of every motion. He did his best to put her at ease. The silence could’ve been awkward, but he fully subscribed to the philosophy that if you pretended like things were fine, other people would ignore the potential awkwardness too. It also gave him what some people had described as “Teflon confidence,” which was usually not at all how he felt, but hey, fake it till you make it. “Do you need a weapon?” he asked. “Darcy carries a Taser. Or, I don’t know, an assault rifle?”

Her lips twitched. “There is a significant difference between a Taser and an automatic rifle.”

He shrugged. “I was trying to give you a range of options. Probably shouldn’t send you in with a bazooka, though. Steve and Tony might have a hissy fit. They don’t completely trust you yet.”

Yet. A word deliberately chosen to imply that the de facto leaders of this little ragtag band might trust her eventually.
“Do you trust me?” she asked.

“Course not,” he said easily. “Not all the way. I’d be an idiot if I did. But I think you’re a good kid and you want to stop this plan of Fury’s as much as we do, so I trust you that far.”

She was squinting at him like she thought he might be some exotic species. “Why are you telling me this?”

“You looked lonely,” he said honestly.

“I wasn’t.”

“Okay.” He shrugged again. “Whatever you say.”

They were quiet for a few minutes. Wanda alternated between staring at Clint and staring at the rest of the crew, who were trying really hard not to stare back. Clint, for his part, sat back on the cold bench like there was nowhere he’d rather be. (Not true. He could really go for a trip to Jimmy John’s right now.)

“You have been with SHIELD a long time?” she said several minutes later.

“Yup. More than half my life now.” Clint frowned. “Damn, sometimes I forget how long it’s been. That’s a weird feeling.”

“They told us SHIELD was rotten,” she said. “Corrupt. That it deserved to be destroyed.”

“I mean, yeah,” Clint said. “Obviously. It’s like those trees that get a parasite growing on them until the tree is more parasite than tree, and only staying upright because the parasite’s propping it upright. Whole thing needed to be burned to the ground.”

“So you agree with Hydra on that count?” she asked, frowning.

“I’m pretty sure Hydra would’ve been happier to see us all dead and Fury still the director of SHIELD,” Clint said frankly. “Since it gave them all that latitude. Now the whole world knows they’re out there.”

“But you did good things for SHIELD too.” Wanda shifted in her seat. “Right? Or you never would’ve stayed.”

“I joined up to do something good with my life,” Clint said quietly. “My childhood wasn’t… fantastic. SHIELD was a chance to be something more than just a burger flipper. And I can definitely see why you wouldn’t like it, but at the end of the day, mostly the only things that hit the news were our screw-ups. The successes go unnoticed. They tell—told—all the recruits we could never expect thanks and medals and shit. I defused a chemical weapon bomb in New Delhi five years back that would’ve killed tens of thousands of people. I’ve killed tyrants, warlords, arms dealers, drug runners, slave traffickers, mercenaries, foreign soldiers. Bad people. SHIELD had Hydra in it, but there were enough good people there to at least partially fulfill its original purpose.”

Wanda was frowning, but not in an “I disagree” way—just thoughtful.

“So,” Clint said. “Could you like—blow up this jet?”

She flinched. “What? Why?”

“I’m just curious,” he said. “Pays to know your teammates’ abilities when you’re fighting with
superheroes. I’m just an ordinary guy.”

“No, you’re not,” she said.

“I mean. I’m natural,” he said with a grin. “No serum, no crazy space gem things messing with my physiology. Just me. Also twenty-plus years of really, really hard work.”

“It’s better that way,” Wanda said. Then blinked. Like she hadn’t meant to say it.

“Why?”

She looked down. “Your skills come from you. You can control them.”

“But yours were forced on you?” he guessed. He could sympathize. After watching Bucky slowly, slowly come back from the dark place he’d been in when they found him—watching him regain an entire person, if not all his memories yet—Clint knew Wanda’d be struggling with some tough shit.

“I don’t know anymore,” she said. “How much of the choice was mine and how much was the scepter working on me. Us.”

“Can’t undo it,” he said firmly. Tough love. “But you can choose what to do with it now. That’s all that matters.”

Wanda stared at him. Hard.

“Come on,” he said, unsure if anything he’d said had reached her, but certain it was important to talk to her. This broken kid who’d learned not to trust anyone, ever. At some point he’d talk to her and her brother about Tony and how much they hated him, but this wasn’t the time. “You’d better join in the planning. We’ll be in Lagos in an hour, only forty minutes ish before our new buddy Crossbones tries to steal a deadly bioweapon.” He paused. “Damn, my life is weird. Let’s go.”

Avengers Tower

March 2012

Loki walked into Darcy’s office with an omelette and no plan besides gaining an opportunity to speak with her.

She was on the phone, speaking in a language he thought was Russian. Allspeak translated it quite easily; the argument concerned jurisdiction over human rights violations in a country called Burma, which Loki recalled from his geographical studies.

“No, I will not—I will not tell you which of the Avengers, if any, was involved in that incident,” Darcy snapped. “As I understand it, there was a black-market arms dealer selling lethal chemical weapons out of that warehouse— whoever went after him was doing you a favor—No, I can’t tell you that!”

There was a tirade of muffled, angry Russian from the phone.

“I’m under no obligation to give you that concession,” Darcy said coldly. “Or tell you whether it would even be true. Seriously, Vladimir, you know the restrictions on people in our positions—”

She paused. Pulled the phone away from her ear, frowned at the screen, put it back up again.
“Vladimir? Oh my god, that bastard hung up on me!” she exclaimed.

Loki placed the omelette down in front of her. “Would you like me to curse him? I can cause some… unfortunate… results to occur regarding his facial hair,” he said with a smirk.

Darcy paused. “You can do that? Without seeing him?”

“I would not have offered had I not meant it,” he said.

“What kind of results?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I can cause the hair of his upper lip to grow at a rate of perhaps one inch per hour for an indeterminate time in a pattern spelling crude words upon his face.”

Darcy snorted. “Okay, yeah, that’s hilarious. What words?”

Loki seated himself and pushed a piece of paper in her direction. “Write the rudest Russian word you know.”

She picked up a pen, thought for a few seconds, and smiled wickedly. “Okay, I’ve got a perfect one.”

Loki examined the arrangement of characters on the scrap of paper.

“Name?” Darcy asked. “Or photograph?”

“Both would be useful.”

Darcy provided him with a photograph, a name, and an approximate location, since her rival had called from his government offices and she could find those easily using the Internet.

Loki cast the spell, using runes since it was a distance working, acutely aware of Darcy’s sharp gaze on him as he worked.

The spell took less than forty seconds. “It is done,” he said, grinning.

“That’s fantastic.” Darcy glanced at her computer. “I’ll have to call him tomorrow. I’ll be all sappy sweet, like hey, Vladimir, I’m sorry I snapped at you yesterday, I’m sure we can work something out, by the way how are you doing? You sounded stressed yesterday and see how he reacts.” She laughed at the idea.

“Could Tony perhaps obtain video footage of him?” Loki said.

“Probably. Hey, can you teach me the magic words?” she asked. “Would I be able to do voodoo shit?”

Loki bit back a smile. It was truly strange, how easily she could amuse him. “We have recorded some instances of Midgardians showing a small talent for magery,” he said. “The odds are astronomically low.”

“Never tell me the odds.”

He shrugged. “We can try, if you wish.”

“Oh yeah,” Darcy said, grinning. She was bouncing in her chair with almost childlike excitement. Incredible how a behavior that would irritate him from anyone else was endearing coming from her.
“Teach me, senpai!”

“What?”

“Sorry. Internet joke. Remind me later. Where do we start?”

Loki paused. It had been many years since he last attempted to instruct anyone in the use of seidr, and never had he worked with someone who was not certain they possessed at least some of the gift for magery. “Seidr is… an energy,” he said, trying to put it into terms that would make sense within the context of Midgardian-level science. “Or a way of interacting with energy and matter. It is an instinctive, inherent gift possessed by some beings for manipulating the most minute particles that make up the universe. One theory is that seidr relies on dark matter; another, which Jane has stumbled upon, is the use of what you call Higgs Boson particles, which give matter its mass, among other effects.

“Should you be capable of this, using the runes of Yggdrasil, you will produce some effect on the world around you. Rune power was lost to the gods until it was rediscovered by Odin when he sacrificed himself to the world tree—the, the energy, the forces, the backdrop of the universe, the thing that stitches it all together and contains everything our universe is—and relearned the basis of the seidr runes. From there, uncountable millennia have been passed by the brightest scholars of a thousand races on expanding and understanding the runes that allow for the control of seidr. The theory behind it is enormously complex and in many cases contradictory; I have made a study of it but you will not need to.”

“Thank God,” Darcy muttered, “I don’t think that would work well.”

“You haven’t the time,” Loki said with a shrug. “And it would be of little practical use. Runes, drawn in ink or, for greatest binding power, blood, are the strongest way to create a working. The other ways to control seidr are progressively more taxing for the caster, though each requires less time: first, tracing runes with a finger upon a solid surface, then in the air, then in the mind and accompanied by a verbal casting, and finally with the mind alone. The latter requires immense focus and also that the caster maintain a constant awareness of what runes control the spell in his or her mind; when the concentration is broken, the spell stops. In some cases, if the spell is complex or difficult and is broken halfway through, the unfinished manipulations of spacetime can result in catastrophe as Yggdrasil attempts to right itself.”

Darcy’s eyes were wide. “Okay, that was like—a lot of information all at once.”

Loki glanced down. “My apologies.” If he’d made a misstep—

“Let me see if I’ve got this,” she said, rubbing her hands together. “So magic is like screwing around with all the teeny tiny pieces of atoms and universe dust that Jane’s always talking about. It’s an ability only a few people have, and not usually Earth people. It’s really complicated and a shit ton of people have spent a really long ass time trying to figure the whole system out and haven’t reached a conclusion but they know how to cast spells. From easiest to hardest, it goes: drawing runes with a pen, drawing them on like a table with your finger, tracing them in the air, saying magic words and thinking about the runes, and then just the thinking part.” She paused. “I think that’s all.”

“I am impressed,” he said honestly, making no effort to disguise it from his face. “Many apprentice scholars on Asgard cannot grasp these concepts so quickly.”

Darcy waved it off. “I’ve spent enough time around Jane to pick up some of this sciencey stuff by like. Osmosis. Look, there’s science for you. So is there like a test you can do to see if I have magic?”
“Yes, but it will probably result in your death,” Loki said, deadpan.

Darcy opened her mouth. Shut it and narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re lying. Dick.”

“I jest,” he agreed, smirking. “You are—how do you say it? Quick on the downtake?”

“Uptake,” she corrected, “and I know you well enough to not fall for that crap.” But she was smiling. “Answer. Honestly.”

“It’s quite simple,” Loki said, and tapped the pad of paper again. “You begin with the strongest of rune casts and attempt a simple spell; I shall show you the runes necessary. If it produces an effect, you will know you possess at least a small inclination towards magery.”

“Show me.”

Loki thought about it for a second. The spell could not be too taxing, lest it overdraw her strength in the unlikely event that it produced any result whatsoever. And the effect would have to be small, uninvasive, yet easily measured.

It could also, possibly, be an opportunity to work a bit of mischief.

Loki hid this turn of thought from his face, not wanting Darcy to notice. “Copy these runes,” he said, drawing them out while employing a skill all instructors of seidr had to learn: that of writing runes while repressing the intent to work a change with them. It was the only way to demonstrate runes without doing the spell oneself. “And concentrate. You must intend them to create a change in the world around you. If you’re simply ‘doodling’ on the paper, it’s likely nothing will come of it.”

Darcy put pen to paper. Stopped. “Has anyone ever discovered a rune on accident?”

“A gifted mage who had yet to discover her power once burned the east wing of the Vanir’s royal palace to the ground by accidentally drawing runes one morning,” Loki said with a smirk. He’d been there, and while the rune part was not his doing, the fire’s… enthusiasm… was not entirely the original caster’s fault. He’d admitted as much to her years later and been slapped in the face for his trouble, but it was worth it.

Darcy shook her head. “That’s nuts. Kay, I’m doing this. Wait, what’s it going to do exactly?”

“Lift that pen in the air,” Loki said, nodding at the tool in question.

Darcy nodded and started drawing, her brows pinched with concentration.

Loki let himself use the time to study her. He didn’t often allow himself to do so; either she would notice, or one of the other Avengers would. But her focus was so complete he was free, for a few rare seconds, to trace the angles of her cheekbones, the hazel of her eyes, the curve of her lips. He knew, if she looked up, she would see the wanting on his face.

But she didn’t.

Darcy drew the last line of the runic inscription. “There.” She looked at the pen, which didn’t move.

Loki was looking at her lips again.

They were purple.

His instinctive reaction was to be somewhat aroused, but it was completely washed away by the
incomprehensible fact that *Darcy had just worked a spell.*

“Damn,” she said, disappointed. “I guess—”

“Look in a mirror,” he said.

She squinted at him. Her eyes widened as she realized. “You fucker, that spell wasn’t a pen-lifting thing a—hold up, *did it work?***

“Look in a mirror,” he repeated, feeling a glorious smile threatening to break out.

Darcy grabbed her phone. Her hands, he noticed, were steady. She opened the camera and put it on the “selfie” setting—and gasped. “Bastard.”

Loki smirked, not wanting to let her see that the slur cut deeper than she’d have expected. “It is a flattering color,” he said.

“Oh my *God* I can do magic!” she suddenly shouted. Her phone flew out of her hand as she flung her arms up and launched into a ridiculous victory attempt at dancing in the middle of the office.

Loki laughed. Involuntarily, sincerely.

“You *suck,*” she said, suddenly whacking him in the shoulder. “But that was well played. And *I can do magic!** Wait, what does that mean exactly? Do I get like a card for the Universal Witch Society or something?***

“There is no… Universal Witch Society.” Loki almost laughed at the thought. “Mages do not get along well enough for an attempt at any such thing to result in less than disaster. For the most part, we are prickly, independent, and slow to forgive. No, you will simply need to acquire a basis in the rune language.” He murmured a few runewords and traced a quick shape in the air. The result was clear; Darcy’s spell was definite but weak. “You’re not a particularly strong mage. I doubt you’ll be able to do much more than small-scale material manipulations within your line of sight, and it’s unlikely that you will progress beyond the stage of at least drawing runes with your fingers. But many simple spells should be within your grasp.”

“This is actually *so cool,*” Darcy said, grinning in a way that made him want to kiss her so badly he almost forgot how to breathe. “So what, you’re gonna teach me?”

“Unless you know another mage,” he said with a smirk.

“Nope.”

Loki was briefly furious at himself for how glad he was of the excuse to spend more time in her company. Then he let the anger fade. Darcy had made it clear she was not interested in anything more than this… strange friendship they’d developed, and he would not push, would not continue to ask. He would spend what time he could in her company. Friendship was not enough but it was better than nothing.

*Someday you’ll have to leave her,* a nasty little voice seemed to say. *Whether you watch her grow old or part ways in ten years, it is inevitable. She is mortal.*

Loki shoved the thought away.

He considered teaching Darcy and Wanda together. But that was a terrible plan. Not only did he suspect that they would either take to one another like birds to the air or hate one another with passion, but he wanted the time with Darcy to be just them.
And, of course, the manner of instruction would necessarily be very different.

_I suppose I can now add ‘tutor’ to the list of things I am becoming here._

“I can’t wait to tell Jane,” Darcy said with that damn grin still on her face. “I’m so excited! Even though like, I know it’ll be hard.”

Loki looked away. _You have no idea._
Chapter 141

Lagos, Nigeria

March 2012

Steve leaned back against the wall, trying to quiet some of the tension humming through his body. He wasn’t exactly inconspicuous in this uniform. Maybe it was time for a change.

“What do you see?”

It wouldn’t hurt to test Maximoff a bit.

He glanced down at the screen in his hand. Sam’s aerial camera drone, fresh off the line and courtesy of Tony Stark, was watching her from high above, though she wouldn’t know it. Wanda sipped her coffee, doing an admirable job staying more or less calm. “Standard beat cops, small station, quiet street. It’s a good time of day for the assault.”

She wasn’t wrong, but she’d missed something important. Steve peeked out the window of the empty apartment he’d chosen as a nest. “There’s an ATM on the corner, meaning…”

“Cameras,” she said. “Right.”

“And both cross streets are one-way, which says what?” Natasha chimed in.

“Escape routes compromised.”

“Fair job,” Natasha said. “Still some work.”

Wanda flinched ever so slightly, but the drone’s cameras were excellent. “This was a test?”

“Don’t pretend you didn’t notice,” Maria said. “You’re too intelligent for that.”

Wanda didn’t reply.

“The cross streets mean our friend doesn’t care about being seen,” Bucky said. His voice was flat, efficient. None of Steve’s old friend, the one who joked around on missions, in it. The Winter Soldier still showed up every time there was a fight, and Steve didn’t think that would ever really go away. Some scars didn’t fade. “He’s willing to make a mess on the way out. More trouble for us, protecting civilians.”

“See the red Range Rover on the corner?” Sam said.

“It’s cute,” Wanda said.

“It’s suspicious,” Sam retorted.

Natasha laughed, a soft ha. “It’s bulletproof. Meaning private security, meaning more guns, meaning more headaches for someone in this game. Probably us.”

Wanda sighed and took another drink. “You know I can move things with my mind, right?”

Whatever Clint said to her in the jet really helped put her at ease a bit. Steve couldn’t help being glad Tony hadn’t been able to come on this one. He appreciated working with his friend, of course;
Tony was a genius, and useful, and they worked as a seamless team at this point. But he would’ve made things unnecessarily tense with someone Steve was trying to bring into the fold.

“Looking over your shoulder should become habit,” Natasha said coolly. “This is not a forgiving life to lead. And the world hasn’t shown much tolerance for our kind of people.”

Steve grinned, even though no one could see it. “Anyone ever tell you you’re kind of paranoid?”

“Not to my face,” Natasha said. She was a table over from Wanda, not facing the younger woman, watching everything. “Why, you hear something?”

Sam snorted.

Steve caught the quick glance Wanda shot at Natasha and his smile widened. It seemed Maximoff hadn’t realized their Black Widow had a sense of humor, dry and offbeat as it was.

“Eyes on target,” Maria said. “We might not get another lead on Rumlow for months, and he’s the biggest Hydra fish we’ve gotten a nibble from.”

“Fish metaphors? Really?” Clint said.

“Says the man nicknamed after a bird.”

“Hey!” Sam protested. “There’s no harm in nicknames. Mine is awesome.” The papers had started calling him by his callsign, Falcon, and he was loving it.

“We can’t lose him,” Maria pressed.

“Won’t be a problem if he sees us,” Steve said. “He hates us.” He paused. “Specifically, me.”

“You’re not the only one who’d like another round with him,” Bucky said darkly.

Steve decided he wanted to watch that fight. Bucky would take Rumlow apart. And he would enjoy seeing it happen.

Something on the camera caught his eye and he straightened, peeking out the window again. “Sam, see that garbage truck? Tag it.”

“Get me X-ray,” Sam muttered, probably tapping away at the tiny screen on his arm that controlled the drone. Steve had to admire Tony’s ingenuity.

Sam swore. “Thing’s loaded for max weight and the driver’s armed.”

“It’s a battering ram,” Clint said. “Do we move?”

Steve had a second to make a choice. With any other target, he’d wait, draw out the rest of the crew—but this was Rumlow. If he knew the Avengers were here, he’d switch his focus to them.

“Go now.”
Chapter 142

Lagos, Nigeria

March 2012

Sam launched from the rooftop.

Wind whistled on his scalp and across the skin on his arms that his armor didn’t cover. Adrenaline surged; his heart pounded.

Free fall was awesome.

Sam snapped out his wings, soaring up and skimming along eight feet above the pavement. People shrieked and pointed but he didn’t care—he had to get to the center for infectious diseases.

“Gas!” Wanda shouted—she and Natasha had been closest. “They’re gassing the place!”

“I make seven hostiles,” Steve said curtly. He sounded like he was running.

Sam surged over the front barricade, taking a moment to appreciate the genius of their assault plan. The loaded truck had blown taken out the vehicle blockades and overhead structuring like paper mâché.

He kicked his legs forward, folded his wings, and dropped straight down onto one of the hostiles’ back. Bone crunched. With a wing-snap and two bullets, Sam took down another and launched, wheeling above the parking lot. “Five.”

“Wanda, get the gas out,” Natasha said. “I’m going in.”

“More than five hostiles here,” Steve said.

Sam’s armband pinged. He wheeled a little away from the infectious disease center. Clint was beneath him in a sniper nest; he aimed and picked off one of the Hydra goons guarding the gate.

The feed on his screen wasn’t good. “There’s a hostage situation in the market two blocks down,” Sam said tightly.

“Dividing—fuck you—us,” Steve said. Sam looked down in time to see his friend kick a car into one of the Hydra guys and then Frisbee his shield through two others. A car exploded. Sam aimed, fired. Two more guys dropped but his last shot missed. “Maria—”

“On it. Clint, Ryan?”

“On my way,” Bucky said tersely.

“Same,” Clint said. Sam caught a glimpse of him sprinting along a rooftop and sent Redwing to cover him with a swipe. The thing was powered by a half-intelligent program or some shit Sam hadn’t totally understood, which made it smart enough to shoot anyone pointing a gun at Clint’s back.

“Wanda, what you need?” he said. The guy he’d missed was covered and returning fired. Sam spun and deflected with a wing, fired back. Nothing. “Steve, little help?”
“On it.” Seconds later, Steve sprinted across the parking lot, shield up, and vaulted over the cement block. “You’re clear.”

Sam swooped in for a landing next to Wanda, knees aching with the strain as he hit just in time to raise his wings and shield her back. She worked to pull the gas out, face tight, fingers twisted but steady. The greenish gas billowed out in clouds, pouring from shattered windows and vents in the walls.

With a few quick shots, Sam emptied his magazine into the last two hostiles in the lot. He folded his wings and watched as the last of the tear gas streamed up into the sky and dissipated.

“That was kind of creepy to watch,” he said. “But also cool. Good work.”

Wanda shot him an unreadable look. “Thanks.”

“Rumlow’s in there,” Steve said, jogging over to them. His face was set in the hard lines of a fight. He and Bucky both flipped switches when they went into battle, unlike Sam and Natasha, for whom it was more of a gradient. “Wanda, boost me?”

“Go.” Wanda crouched, holding up her hands. A red gleaming circle appeared between them.

Steve scrambled up on the wreckage of a car.

Something exploded on the top floor.

“I’m good,” Natasha said.

A burst of machine gun fire.

“Still good.”

Steve launched himself down onto Wanda’s shield. She thrust her hands up, biting her lip. Steve flew straight up into the air, crashing through a window shield first.

“Sam, aerial help would be nice,” Clint said tightly.

“Coming. You got this?” Sam asked Wanda.

“I’m fine.” A Hydra guy popped up across the lot; she blocked his bullets and then dropped a car on him.

“Yeah, you are,” Sam agreed. “See you back on the jet.”

He shot up into the air, heading for the market.

Lagos, Nigeria

March 2012

Four soldiers, fully armed. Twenty-seven civilians, corralled inside hastily erected barriers of tipped-over boxes and freestanding metal waist-high fence segments found in the market. Most of them were sobbing; many were young. Bucky’s eyes snagged on a teenage girl near the edge, holding two small children close to her chest. Her eyes were hard and her face was set even though both the kids
—probably her siblings; there was a resemblance—were both bawling.

“Shut them up!” one of the soldiers shouted, brandishing his gun in the girl’s face.

She tugged the little boy closer, bending down to talk to him.

“Where are they?” one of the soldiers said. Sam was using the drone’s long-range microphones and piping the sound into their earpieces. “Rumlow said the Avengers would come.”

“Maybe he was wrong,” another one said darkly.

Bucky looked around. “Clint, you in position?”

“Nearly.”

“Sam?”

“Ready when you are.”

Bucky saw Maria down below; she’d grabbed a long bolt of colorful cloth from somewhere and wrapped herself in it completely, covering her hair, tact suit, and weapons. She was huddling in the wreckage of a fruit stand. “I’m going in,” she said. “I can get close and distract them. Be ready.”

Bucky wanted to ask what her plan was. Decided to trust her and wait.

Maria stood up and started walking slowly toward the pen of hostages, hands raised. The soldiers’ guns trained on her almost instantly. Somehow she’d altered her posture and gait and looked nothing like a highly trained assassin, spy, and soldier.

With their attention fixed on Maria, Bucky was free to work his way closer. He bolted down the stairs from the second floor to the first, slipped out the front door, and rolled behind a truck. It gave him enough cover to dive into the pedestrians-only market and start working his way through the abandoned stalls, listening to Maria’s conversation as he went.

She started babbling in a language he didn’t understand.

“Freeze!” “Stop or we shoot!” “Speak English!” the soldiers shouted.

Bucky caught a glimpse of Maria standing maybe twenty feet away from the barricade, fifteen from the soldiers. Her hands were up in the air and trembling.

“My children,” Maria said, voice shaking. Somehow she had a heavy accent. “My children are in there. Let me go to them, please, I would be with them—”

“She’s good,” Sam whispered.

“She was second in command at SHIELD, what’d you expect?” Clint said. “I’m in position. I can take two of them, civvies in the way for the other two.”

“Sam, shield the civilians,” Bucky whispered, moving closer. Sam had the wings and the could provide a good width of mobile cover. The soldiers were arguing among themselves but he ignored it. “Maria, you and I take the soldiers.”

Maria didn’t react, but he hadn’t expected her to.

Something wasn’t right about this. They were too exposed down here. Rumlow had to know the
Avengers wouldn’t have too hard a time taking down these soldiers.

“Sam, can the drone get a read on these buildings around us?” Bucky asked.

“His name’s Redwing.”

Bucky ignored this.

“Scanning…”

The soldiers were letting Maria walk forward. In five seconds she’d be between them—their best chance.

“Sam—”

“Shit they’ve got more in the buildings—”

“Take them,” Bucky said, “I’m going in,” and then he was moving, surging up and over, hoping Loki hadn’t lied and his disguise would hold, and up ahead Maria had shucked aside her disguise and already killed one of the soldiers and engaged the other. The two a little farther away had sprouted arrows in their necks. Gunfire strafed the pavement and Bucky ran harder. He and the hostages were fish in a barrel down here; if Sam couldn’t take out the soldiers in the buildings they’d all die—

Maria took down the last soldier on the ground.

Bucky grabbed a sheet of metal and yelled with the effort as he swung it over his shoulders and dove in front of the hostages, taking impacts of bullets against its back. Heat and force drilled through the metal. A bullet bit through and into his tact vest. He wasn’t protecting all of them, he couldn’t, but he could at least save a few.

He fell to a knee beneath the force.

The fire was concentrated on his back. He had to hold out until his teammates could handle the rest of this. Their voices sounded in his ear but Bucky couldn’t pay attention. The metal he’d grabbed wasn’t made for this; it was giving up, giving way—

He blinked. Once, again. In front of him, on the other side of the barrier, the girl he’d seen earlier was pressed flat to the ground with the two kids under her. She’d shielded them with her own body. She was just a kid and she’d been brave enough to do that.

Bucky was a grown man, enhanced by radical human experimentation, armed and armored. If she could do it, so would he.

The metal on his back was sagging. It wouldn’t last more than a few more seconds.

He prepared to fling himself forward and provide cover for what people he could as soon as it gave.

The girl started to move.

Bucky tried to shout at her, tell her to get down, but there was too much noise and she ignored him.

Stood up.

Raised her hands.
Metal from all around the market, including the chunk on Bucky’s back, hurtled through the air. Slammed together and ratcheted up, up, up, casting the screaming hostages in shade and blocking out the bullets.

Bucky slowly straightened. The lower edge of the barricade rested on the ground behind him. The girl had her hands fisted at her sides, glaring up at the metal barricade with sweat dripping down her face and a tiny drop of blood beading beneath her nose.

The bullets stopped.

“Clear,” Sam said. “Uh… the fuck is that?”

“You can let it down now,” Bucky said to the girl. “We’re good. My teammates handled it.”

The other hostages were slowly standing up, looking around and making amazed noises.

The girl slowly began to let the pieces of her shield fall apart. The sun returned in patches, beating down on them.

Maria walked over to them and gave the girl an appraising look. “You did that?”

She nodded, slowly gathering her brothers to her.

“Did you know you could?”

Again, a single nod.

Maria and Bucky shared a glance.

“The UN’s going to want to bring her in,” Clint said.

“We’ll protect her,” Bucky said firmly.

Sam landed hard next to them. “Listen, kid—what’s your name?”

She didn’t answer.

“Right, okay, you don’t want to tell me, I get it.” Sam shoved back his goggles. “Secrecy and all. Look, you just saved a bunch of people, including my idiotic self-sacrificing friend here—”

“Shut up,” Bucky said irritably.

“—and I know you probably want to just vanish again, but there are people in the United Nations who specialize in finding people with gifts like yours, and they’ll track you down eventually. If you come with us now, we can make sure you’re treated well.” Sam stopped.

The girl didn’t respond. Her brothers had quit crying and clung to the bottom of her colorful dress.

“Okay, that’s my whole speech,” Sam said. “I mean—wait, do you have family? Parents, grandparents? A home?”

She shook her head.

“Would it help if we promise to take care of your brothers too?” Maria said. “Because we need to clear this up and get back to our friends, but we don’t want to leave you.”
“World’s not always nice to people with abilities,” Bucky said.

“Why are you here?” the girl asked. Her English was excellent, with a melodic accent.

They exchanged looks. “Uhhh…” Sam said.

“You’ve seen the news pieces about Hydra and SHIELD?” Bucky checked.

She nodded.

“A Hydra agent named Rumlow is attacking the Center for Infectious Diseases to steal a bioweapon. We came to stop him.”

Sirens wailed in the distance.

“What language were you speaking?” the girl said, looking at Maria. “When you came up to the barrier.”

Maria shrugged. She was tense as a board. “Gibberish. I didn’t expect them to have bothered to learn any of the Niger-Congo languages, and I don’t know any either, but I needed them to think of me as helpless.”

For the first time, the girl’s face softened towards something that vaguely resembled a smile.

“I’m Zina,” she said. “My brothers, Samir and Ilias. If you promise to take care of them, we will come with you.”

“Awesome.” Sam squinted up at the sky.

“I’ll take care of her,” Clint said. “Get back, help the others.”

Something exploded behind them. Bucky whipped around. Smoke rose from the vicinity of the infectious diseases lab.

“Time to go,” he said, and then he and Maria were sprinting across the abandoned market, Sam soaring overhead.
Hi everyone! For anyone who has just found this fic-this chapter was originally a duplicate of the previous one due to some battles waged between myself and AO3. (In case anyone's interested, AO3 won this particular skirmish.) I don't want to delete a chapter and therefore the comments attached to it, so please just move right along to chapter whatever's next (I don't remember what number I'm up to now, oops) for the next bit of story! Thanks for reading :)

Chapter 143
“Hey, bitch,” Rumlow said. She assumed he was Rumlow because the other soldiers were taking his orders.

Natasha grinned at him. “You’re sounding a little hoarse there. Come to find some cough syrup?”

He lunged in. They exchanged a flurry of blows.

_He’s been practicing._ He was faster than the last time they’d fought, and he’d clearly been studying her fighting style.

Natasha sprang backwards and up onto the edge of the armored car behind her. The height advantage gave her a respite and then Rumlow was up and coming for her again.

The exhilaration of the fight pounded through her. This was fantastic, this was a _challenge_, and—

_I won last time, I can again_, Natasha thought.

“No!” Wanda shouted.

She glanced over. For less than a second. But it was all the opening Rumlow needed.

He swept out her legs and tipped her backwards into the car’s open hatch. Dropped a grenade in and slammed the metal.

Natasha and the two men in the tank heard the lock. They stared at the grenade. Then her.

“Hey, fellas,” she said with a smirk.

They raised their guns in the same second. She didn’t let them get that far. Both of them were down and dying in seconds. She grabbed one body, spun around to face the grenade—

It exploded. Blew her and her human shield through the back of the tank and into the street.

Natasha rolled over and sat up with a groan.

“—a shell game!” Steve was saying. “Three groups, one of them has the bioweapon—”

“I’ve got the one with the knives.” Natasha stood up and blinked until her vision cleared. Wanda was across the parking lot, sprinting, disappearing down a side street.

Four more Hydra people were running. Two groups of two, one in each direction down the main street.

“I’ve got southwest,” she said, and took off after her targets.

They were fast.
Natasha was faster.

She caught up to the two men four blocks away, in another little open-air vehicle-free market. People screamed and shouted after her; the soldiers ahead didn’t bother to dodge, knocking down men, women, fruit stands, chairs, and scooters without care. Natasha did her best not to leave any extra chaos, but it was hard. An end table here, a burst mango there—

She spun sideways, ducked around a canopy, vaulted onto the roof of a squat wooden building, and somersaulted off the far side right into the path of her targets.

They skidded to a halt.

The first one snaked out a hand and dragged a young boy closer, eyes panicked behind the helmet. He had a gun aimed at the kid’s head.

Natasha stilled, half-crouched.

“I’ll drop this,” the second soldier said, panting. He was holding a glass cylinder capped with metal and half-full of a sinister red liquid that looked like the scientists back at the lab had plucked it straight from a bad science fiction film.

“He’ll do it,” the first soldier said. “And I’ll shoot the kid. We’ve got gas masks. We’ll have time to escape.”

The three of them formed an awkward triangle in the center of a crowd of quiet, terrified onlookers. It was the disaster instinct of humans, the same thing that makes them stare at car crashes on the side of the road. That held them in the center of a crowded marketplace watching a face-off between two armed men, one of whom held a hostage, and a single woman.

Natasha considered the widow cuffs around her wrists, the shockprods embedded in her suit’s forearms and calves, the knives and guns around her hips and strapped to her thighs. She had a multitude of weapons, the deadliest being her mind and the second deadliest being her complete ruthlessness.

Objectives, in order of priority: recover the bioweapon, save the child’s live, kill the soldiers.

“You expect me to simply walk away?” she said with a smirk.

The first soldier’s grip on the kid tightened. “Yeah, bitch. And if we see a hair off your teammates’ heads, we shoot the kid. Then everyone else we see.”

*I’m going to enjoy killing you. If only I had time to draw it out a bit…*

Natasha looked down at the boy for a fraction of a second. His dark eyes were wide and terrified, their sclera vivid against his dark brown skin.

She moved. Snapped out her left hand, sending a tiny metal bead packed with wicked painful energy shooting straight for the first soldier’s hand on the gun. It hit his bare skin with perfect accuracy. He howled. Fingers tightened on the trigger.

The second soldier opened his hand.

Natasha dove.

She stretched out over the ground, body extended in an arc, mind ticking, ticking, ticking. Heart
pounding. (Not with fear.)

Her hand closed around the glass inches above the earth. She rolled with the momentum and came up shooting. The first soldier had dropped his gun. The kid was thrashing. Natasha aimed around his small form.

Shoulder shot. Soldier down. The boy was free.

Natasha had time to see him dive back into the crowd before the second soldier used her distraction and yanked his own gun up to bear on her.

She barely dodged the stream of bullets. Kicked the gun out of his hands and across the clearing. Flexed her wrist and a shockprod dropped into her waiting palm, black and metal and twelve inches long. The end crackled as she thumbed its energy settings all the way up to what Clint called char-broiled and smiled.

The soldier drew a knife.

Natasha lunged in.

He was down in seconds.

She stalked across the packed earth, the bioweapon steady in her left hand and the shockprod already re-sheathed on her right forearm.

The first soldier choked and scrambled backward on the dirt. Away from her. Natasha smiled wider at the fear and desperation in his movements and his eyes.

“Got an owie?” she purred, kneeling above him and drawing a knife from his own belt.

He tried to punch her. She broke his arm and then the other one. The helmet muffled his screams.

“I’d rather be a bitch than dead,” Natasha breathed, and then she stabbed him in the gut. She knew exactly where to aim—the blade slid between the panels of his protective gear, angled to shred his intestines and hopefully pierce a kidney, if the blade was long enough. He was left lying in his own toxic filth. It’d kill him in thirty minutes if he wasn’t taken to a hospital, and based on the last impression she’d gotten of this crowd, none of them would be rushing to call an ambulance.

Natasha twisted the blade once, yanked it out, and left it on the ground. It was poor quality.

As she stood up and glanced around, she caught glimpses of the awe and fear in the eyes of the people around her. Black Widow, they whispered, in English, mostly, which she remembered was the national language of Nigeria. There were other tongues, too, the Niger-Congo branch of African dialects, but mostly English, spoken with a lyrical accent. Avengers. Cross her. Hydra.

“They were stealing an experimental bioweapon to sell on the black market,” Natasha said expressionlessly. “It would most likely have been used on an urban population not unlike this one. I need to get back to my teammates. You can do with these two what you want.”

She walked away.

The crowds parted for her as if she’d been Thor, spitting lightning from his hammer, or Steve with helmet and shield on.

Natasha liked her own brand of fear better.
Chapter End Notes

Sorry to everyone for the double chapter weirdness-I had some battles with AO3 and appear to have lost, since I'm leaving up both chapters so I don't delete anyone's comments. Thanks to everyone who pointed out the error! (And to all my commenters, kudo-leavers, or lurking readers--you're all great :D)
“Loki, we need to talk to you. It’s important.”

Loki paused just inside the doors of the lab. Bruce, Jane, and Tony were sitting around in a circle. Jane and Tony were uncharacteristically serious. Bruce always looked serious, so that wasn’t particularly disconcerting, but something about this situation—

“Our interactions are almost exclusively made up of us conversing and you running experiments on me,” Loki said, raising an eyebrow. “And then further conversation. I fail to see how talking to me is important.”

Tony bit back a smile. Bruce frowned and sat up straighter. “Loki, Jane noticed something off with your blood work.”

Norns. Loki kept his panic hidden and waited.

“Don’t you want to know what it was?” Tony asked finally.

“Not particularly.” Loki gave them a cunning smile, but behind it, his mind was working furiously. *I could alter their memories, yet I find myself averse to the idea. Sentiment is truly a foolish path, yet I’m already ensnared. Our agreement included a clause that I permit you to draw my blood and study it. I was never asked to help interpret the results.”

“You walked into that,” Bruce muttered to Tony.

Tony was irritated. “I *know*.”

“Friday thinks the DNA analysis of your nucleotide base sequence has been tampered with,” Jane continued, undeterred.

“They’re technically not nucleotide bases,” Bruce put in. “Helen was helping me look at Thor’s results last week, and we made some advancements—enough to start unraveling what the molecule actually is, and it’s not similar enough to our own that—”

“Not that this isn’t fascinating, but some other time, please?” Tony said.

“I had JARVIS start running an analysis of the distribution of the… whatever bases,” Jane said. She was staring Loki down. He met her gaze squarely and kept his expression impassive. “It got sidelined in the transfer from JARVIS to Friday, but Friday finished last week. The data was definitely tampered with.”

“I presume you’ve been examining surveillance records,” Loki said calmly. Every sentence out of her mouth closed off his options a little bit more. He was rapidly coming to the unpleasant conclusion that he would be forced to tell them something close to the truth in order to make them give this up. Or simply immobilize them and disappear.

But while Loki was known as the liesmith, he tried never to lie to himself, and he knew he’d miss them, should he leave. Enough that staying here was worth the risk of continuing this uncertain lie.
“We have.” Tony’s gaze was sharp. “There’s nothing unusual. Even you have never been in here without supervision, and your every movement with supervision has been accounted for. Exhaustively. By Friday, running a comparison of the exact times you’ve been in the labs, what computers you’ve used, and the activity logs for those computers at those times. You’ve never done anything you weren’t supposed to do.”

Loki shrugged. “In that case, I must confess I do not understand why I feel as though you are accusing me of something.”

“That’s because we are,” Bruce said flatly. His arms were crossed and he looked genuinely angry—not Hulk-angry, but enough. “You used your magic to come in here unnoticed, wipe your records from the system, and leave without showing up on the cameras. You broke your word.”

Loki almost, almost flinched.

It was true. He’d sworn to alert them to any use of seidr while he stayed here. And aside from the once, he’d kept his promise. Even while playing pranks, he always told at least Darcy or Tony—he always had an accomplice.

“What do you want from me?” he asked, voice low. He didn’t completely keep a dangerous edge from it.

“A confession would be nice,” Tony snapped. “But what I really want to know is why .”

“I confess.” Loki met their accusatory, hurt—even now, he was still surprised that they could care enough about him to be hurt by this—gazes squarely. “I did as you have said. I tampered with the DNA analysis of my blood and used seidr without informing you to eliminate any trace of myself doing so.”

“But why?” Bruce pressed, stepping forward. “Loki—”

“Because I had no choice.” Loki felt his expression hardening.

Thor’s voice echoed in his head. *I’ll hunt down the monsters and slay them all.* A memory forever engraved in his consciousness. And Darcy and Jane both knew enough of the other realms and the races that dwelled in them to have passed on to the rest of the team Thor’s tales of the Jotun menace. They would hate him and he would lose the only people he had left in the universe.

“There is a secret to my past that I cannot share with you,” he said, and now his voice was both razor-sharp and lined with desperation. It was real, but some part of him was cool and calculating, whispering *let them see, soften them with a display of vulnerability, take your weakness and turn it into power.* “I—I can’t . Not with anyone. I resisted the blood work for this reason, I tampered with the results for this reason, and I did not wish to break my word but I had no better choice. So do not ask me to tell you the truth. I will not. Under any circumstances.” Loki gritted his teeth and forced out a word that had almost never crossed his lips. “Please.”

There was a long pause.

“Did he just say…” Tony started.

“Oh yeah.” Bruce’s expression had gone from angry to a mix of shocked and sympathetic. “He said it.”

Loki looked down, feigning an effort to control his features when really it was simple to tuck all his emotion away again. He’d had millennia to practice, after all. But the pretense would convince them
of his sincerity. And he was sincere. Just… manipulative about expressing it.

He couldn’t quite be remorseful.

“I say yeah,” Jane said abruptly. “We’ve all got secrets, right?” Her face was tight, and Loki wondered, for the first time, what might be hiding in Jane’s past. Darcy hid her own horrific experiences so well (even now, Loki felt a wash of fury at the thought of her father, and an urge to turn his skin into boils). It was possible that Jane’s implacable pursuit of her science was driven in part by a desire to run from her own history.

But that was a concern for another time.

“I think he means it. I suck at reading people, but I still think he means it.” Jane shrugged. “So let’s let him have the secret.”

“Will it harm anyone in this tower if we let you not tell us?” Tony said. His voice and face were uncompromising. Loki knew this man would go to the ends of the universe to protect his family, and respected that fire.

“No. No harm will come to any of you if I do not enlighten you,” Loki said. “I swear it.”

He couldn’t quite bring himself to also swear that he would tell them if that ever changed. Loki wasn’t the self-sacrificing type.

“Then okay.” Tony exhaled loudly through his nose. “Sure. I need a drink.”

“I’m coming.” Bruce hopped down off the counter and followed Tony out.

Tony paused by the doors. “Yo, Reindeer Games. One of these days you’re gonna tell me how you got past JARVIS, Friday, and me.”

Loki smiled thinly. “I cannot reveal all my secrets, Stark.”

Tony rolled his eyes and led Bruce out of the room.

“You should tell Darcy,” Jane said softly.

Loki whipped around. “What?”

“You should tell Darcy. Not your secret, but that you have one.” She glanced down. “I know her, Loki. She’d always rather know that you’re keeping a secret, and trust that you’ve got a good reason for not telling the truth, than find out you lied.”

It was a subtle distinction, but an important one. Loki had walked the line between the two things many times—admitting to keeping a secret, and feigning distress at doing so—when necessary. But never like this.

Never when it mattered.

“I… will consider it,” he said reluctantly.

Jane frowned at him. “You’re already in a weird place with her. I would do more than consider it if I were you.”

“ Weird… place?” Loki said.
“If you just want a mistress, then fuck off,” Jane said. Loki blinked at hearing the oath from her—Jane almost never swore. Unlike Darcy. “But if that’s not all? Probably tell her that, too.”

Jane left.

Loki was alone in the lab with his thoughts.

Darcy had thought—or suspected—that he only wanted her… as a time-passer. And so had James, it seemed. And Jane, likely because Darcy voiced her worries to her friend.

He’d never explained otherwise. Had assumed she walked away that night because she was repulsed, because he’d never been enough for anyone. (Especially not when Thor entered the picture, though here, at least, that was not a concern. Tony loved to tell the tale of Darcy tasing Thor on the balcony.)

And he knew Jane was correct, in that Darcy would be wounded to ever learn Loki had kept a secret.

But he couldn’t tell them. Her.

Loki was a monster, and he always would be. Silvertongue, Liesmith, Traitor Prince, God of Mischief, Poiseyes, Odin’s knife in the dark, Asgard’s tethered guard dog. And there was not a place in the Nine Realms where he would find sanctuary should the truth of his parentage come to light. No society that would be comfortable with his presence.

For the most part, Loki accepted those aspects of himself. He knew who he was and walked the path the Norns had set him with his head held high and his eyes daring anyone to challenge him. Even before he learned of Odin’s deception, he’d largely shunned close interpersonal bonds, cut himself off from everyone but Frigga, and learned to value his solitude. He needed no companionship. Relied on no one but himself.

But since the day he held the Casket of Eternal Winters in his hands and watched his skin change color as the unconscious spell he’d held in place since infancy faded away at last, the truth of his status as an outcast—the weight of eternal loneliness—had threatened to crush him.

And never had it felt heavier than at this moment.
Chapter 146

Lagos, Nigeria

March 2012

Wanda could hear Rogers’ conversation with Rumlow through the earpiece, over her heavy breathing and pounding heart. She didn’t know all the history between them but she could tell it wasn’t pleasant. If she concentrated, she could feel them up ahead, a beacon of anger and looming violence that sliced through the miasma of fear and confusion that hung over the crowds. This area was mostly pedestrian traffic between the buildings; Rogers and Rumlow had gone toward the nicer and more industrialized area while Romanoff had headed back in the direction of the slums.

Romanoff could handle herself. Also, Rumlow felt dangerous. Wanda didn’t dare reach farther into his mind for fear of losing control again, but she could tell he was walking a knife’s edge of some kind, and the results wouldn’t be pleasant no matter which way he fell.

She had to get there first.

She ran harder.

Because she had the power to stop whatever Rumlow wanted to do.

“Don’t I look pretty now?” Rumlow sneered, just as she skidded to a halt a bit away. She couldn’t resist the shock on her face: he was hideously scarred, skin melted and twisted into a caricature of a face.

“You’ve seen better days,” Wilson said, thumping to the ground on Rogers’ other side.

They formed a lopsided triangle with Rumlow in the middle, glaring at Rogers, while people tentatively crept closer around them. Whispering. Staring. Wanda wanted to tear up the ground around herself until she frightened them away.

“Who’s your buyer?” Rogers demanded.

Rumlow spat blood on the ground. “Don’t need a buyer, I have a boss.”

“Who’s your boss, then?” Rogers said.

Clint’s voice came through Wanda’s earpiece. “Wanda. Can’t you read minds?”

Rogers and Wilson both glanced at her.

She shook her head minutely. She couldn’t reach into his head—not without risking her control.

They glanced back down.

Rumlow didn’t spare her a glance. Infuriating.

“You know who I’m working with,” Rumlow sneered. “Same guy I’ve always been working with. Same guy you were too stupid to ally yourself with when you had the chance.” He laughed. Wanda shivered. It sounded mad. “You’re all gonna die because you picked the wrong side. I just wish I could be around to watch you finally eat your own shit.”
Then Wanda got a flash of his intention. “No!” she shouted, lunging forward just as he detonated his vest.

The world froze.

People screamed. Rogers and Wilson flinched.

Wanda’s hands shook. The explosion was contained in a sphere of energy ten feet across—harder than anything she’d ever done. But all that heat and force wanted out still, and she thought it would maybe work to open a tiny gap and let it out a bit at a time, but that would take too long and her entire force field might collapse—

Desperately, she raised her hands, dragging Rumlow’s half-burned body and the explosion into the sky. She was arched back, crouching, every muscle trembling with the effort. Up up up up—

She couldn’t contain it any longer.

The explosion burst free, and bit a hole in the side of the office building next to the market.

People screamed. Sirens wailed. A man jumped from a window, his clothes on fire, and bounced off a stall in the street. Not moving.

Wanda realized she was kneeling on the earth, hands clamped to her mouth.

*My fault. All my fault.*

Wanda slipped away as soon as she could.

She remembered being a child. Pietro was the quick one; he never stopped moving, sneaking food from people’s apartments, dashing up and down the stairs, chasing squirrels and dogs in the park down the street. (It wasn’t a fancy park, but it was something other than concrete and steel.) When their games got too much, when she wanted time to herself, she’d pick a tree and climb until she was up above everything. Pietro could never climb as well as she could.

There were no trees in Stark Tower and the Avengers probably wouldn’t let her leave, but it *did* have a rooftop access.

She was a little surprised to find chairs and a table already up here. Like someone else, or several someones, had made rooftop retreats a habit. There were pencil shavings on the ground when she investigated, and two empty bottles of good whiskey. Rogers and Stark, then.

Stark.

Wanda should probably talk to him at some point.

He’d been avoiding her and Pietro, likely because the rest of the team had asked him to. It seemed—unusual, for him, and didn’t line up with what she knew of the man. But he’d stayed away.

Stayed away from his own home.

And the more she thought about it, the more she realized Pietro was right, the Avengers were right, and the scepter had probably warped her hatred beyond reason. Away from it, she could admit it didn’t make much sense to blame Stark for the bomb. He hadn’t dropped it. He’d only made them, and sold them. And when he realized that someone was selling his weapons under the table to bad people, he’d turned on an old family friend to do it.
He was screwed up, and certainly flawed. But she suddenly found the hatred that had kept her going for months dying away, replaced by exhaustion.

“Nice up here, isn’t it?”

Wanda whipped around. She’d been so caught up in her own head she hadn’t noticed Darcy Lewis approaching.

Lewis was average height, pretty but not beautiful, fit but not particularly muscular. Wanda had almost passed her over as inconsequential until she’d brushed Lewis’ thoughts accidentally and found the razor-sharp mind lurking in her head.

“What are you doing?” Wanda asked carefully. This woman would make a formidable foe. Her own manipulations didn’t work as well on strong-willed people.

Darcy shrugged. Walked over to the edge of the roof and leaned on it, seemingly unconcerned with Wanda. “I pestered your brother until he told me you liked high places. Wasn’t much of a stretch from there.”

Wanda hesitated, then joined her at the railing. “You come up here often?”

“Not me so much. The others, yeah. I’m not much of an outdoors person.” Darcy snorted. “I prefer to look down on the city from safely inside my glass corner office, thanks. No bugs, and climate control is fantastic. Plus people do weird shit on rooftops. I saw three guys in suits get into a fight on an office, like punches-and-kicking fight, that ended in two of them kissing and the other one storming back inside. And, God, this one time a lady chased a poodle around for two hours. She couldn’t catch her own goddamn dog. Then she hit it a few times and dragged it inside.”

“That’s horrible,” Wanda said, appalled. “Which apartment?” If she could get the building, maybe she could… do something. What exactly, she would sort out later.

“I took care of it.” Something dark passed over Darcy’s face. “Dog’s living with some old friends of mine. The woman got fired.”

“I do not think I would wish to make you angry,” Wanda said.

Darcy laughed. It rang out above the city sounds Wanda still wasn’t totally accustomed to. It had really only been a few days since she came here, after all. “For what it’s worth, you don’t seem like a good person to piss off, either.”

They lapsed into silence for a few minutes.

“Who else uses the roof?” Wanda asked. “Stark, I see…”

Darcy grinned at the bottles. “He and Steve and Bucky and… Sam? Maybe L-Liam, too.” Wanda narrowed her eyes—she had a constant awareness of the minds around her, and when she paid attention to those impressions, it was little more than a slight edge to intuitively reading people. And she was seeing a thread of deception in Darcy’s mind. Wanda wanted to delve deeper, but stopped herself—that would be a breach of privacy too severe for someone she hoped to befriend. “I peeked at the camera at one point to make sure they hadn’t killed each other. It was a quiet night, after Liam and Tony got back from a mission somewhere in South Africa. Mostly I think they just wanted to chill without talking or having to deal with phones and shit. They were just passing the bottles around and swapping stories, but not talking much.”

“Mmm.” It was a quieter, plasanter picture than Wanda had imagined. “You are… more complex
than I expected.”

“’You’ being me or ‘you’ being ‘you Avengers?’

“The latter.”

“I thought so, too.” Darcy shrugged. “You get over it. At least you have a superpower. Speaking of which, isn’t Liam going to train you?”

Wanda blinked. “Ah. Yes.”

Darcy nodded slowly.

“Why are your lips purple?” Wanda blurted. “Is it lipstick?” It didn’t look like lipstick.

Darcy’s face did something that was halfway between a smile and a scowl. “Not lipstick. Liam likes pranks.”

Wanda laughed. Surprising herself a little. “Should I worry?”

“Nah. Not for a few days, at least. Once he gets comfortable around you, then yeah. He turned Tony’s hair blond for a while, and spelled this one doorway so that all your clothes vanished if you walked through it, and magicked a shadow that followed Clint around for a week. We had a prank war going. It was hell here for a few months over the winter. But fun hell.”

“You talk a lot.”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Brilliant observation.”

Wanda looked down at her hands. Something about this conversation had set her at ease a bit, and now the guilt and anger she’d locked away on the flight here came roaring back.

If only she had a better handle on her power, she could’ve looked into Rumlow’s mind and seen what he wanted to do. She couldn’t sift through memories, but she could glean things off the surface, things you were preoccupied with or, if she was careful, things your subconscious was mulling over. Like Fury’s plans with Thanos—those were a deep-rooted part of his thought patterns. But going that far in left her vulnerable, so she hadn’t dared this time, and he’d had time to detonate what Rogers didn’t realize was a suicide vest. And if she’d been in control, she could’ve let the pressure out, or raised the explosion higher and away from the building—

“Where is he?” she blurted. “Liam.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow, but didn’t comment. “In his rooms, probably. It’s like eleven at night and Bruce and Jane had him down in the labs all day, sticking him with things. I’m sure he’s tired—actually, on second thought, he can make coffee, you look like you’re about to have a heart attack. I’ll show you where he stays.”

“Thank you,” Wanda said.

Darcy shrugged, already heading back inside. “Part of being a team, right?”

She led the way down to the Avengers’ living floor.

It was the first time Wanda had stopped on this floor; the stairwell at one end was the same one she’d taken up to the roof, and she hadn’t been able to resist a quick glance through the pane of glass, but she hadn’t dared snoop. Not with the Magician around. It was unsettling to know that someone was
here who could take her power away—and unsettling how much she’d grown to rely on it.

The hall was long and curved, with doors lining both sides. The doors on the right were farther apart, but more numerous. It was simply furnished, but pleasant, with beige walls and glossy black stone underfoot. The lights were beautiful, complicated things formed of glass and steel.

Darcy stopped at a door about halfway down the hall and knocked. “Liam? I’ve got Wanda here,” she called.

Liam opened the door and examined them both.

“I want to start training with you,” Wanda blurted. “Today. Now.” *So what happened in Lagos will be the last incident of its kind.*

“You are sure?” Nothing revealed in his voice.

She nodded.

Liam twisted his hand, and a green light flared to life, hovering perfectly still in the center of the hallway. “Follow it,” he said. “It will lead you to the training floor. Does this mean you are willing to work with the Avengers from this point forward?”

Wanda took a deep breath. “Yes,” she said quietly. “For as long as it takes to bring down Fury and Thanos. That is all I can promise.”

“It is all I require,” Loki said. “I will find Steve and inform him of our purpose, then join you.”

Wanda swallowed, nodded, and took a hesitant step toward the green light.

It started moving, smoothly and soundlessly, back down the hall toward the stairs. She followed.

But not single-mindedly. There was a strange cast to Darcy and Liam’s minds when they were together. Wanda glanced back over her shoulder. Liam had paused in front of Darcy, breath drawn in as if about to speak, but after several seconds Darcy looked down and walked away in the other direction.

Wanda turned away hurriedly, just as the little light guided her around the corner and out of their sight.
Chapter 147

Avengers Tower

April 2012

“Wanda?” Jane said, pushing into the training room. “I— oh.”

Loki as Liam glared at her, and turned back to his newest student. “Try again,” he demanded.

“I can’t,” Wanda insisted.

“Yes, you can.” Loki leaned against a rack of weights and waited.

“Try again,” he said, his eyes narrowed. Wanda’s hands contorted, and the weight rack she was trying to move—a massive thing, laden with metal plates—creaked.

“You underestimate yourself,” Loki said nastily. “Like you couldn’t contain that explosion in Lagos? Like you couldn’t reach into Rumlow’s mind without losing control? Like you did lose control touching Fury’s?”

Wanda bared her teeth in a snarl. Her hands contorted.

The weight rack went flying as if a commercial airliner had suddenly plucked it off the ground and thrown it straight at Loki.

Jane opened her mouth to scream—

But he simply raised a hand, and the rack’s momentum was abruptly arrested. It hung in the air, then slowly returned to its place, reminding Jane oddly of a chastised pet.

All the anger had drained from Wanda’s face, replaced by shock.

“You fear your ability,” Loki said flatly. “Your fear controls you—gives your power control over you. Until you master that fear, until you believe that you can control it, you will not be able to do so.”

“You didn’t have to—to remind me—”

“Likely not,” Loki agreed. “I will not apologize, if that’s what you want. We do not have time to train you gently. If you want my help, do not question my methods.” He paused. “The death count in Lagos would have been far higher, and perhaps even included Steve, had you not managed to lift the
explosion as far as you did. You will likely always feel guilty for your partial failure. You can either let that guilt destroy you, or you can train so nothing similar ever occurs again.” He turned to Jane at last. “Dr. Foster. A pleasure, as always.”

“Liam,” she said, partly to remind herself to use his fake name. “Hi. Can I talk to Wanda?”

“As it please you,” Loki said, waving a hand. “We are through here.”

“No, we’re not,” Wanda snapped. “If I can only move it when I’m angry—”

“And are you likely to be calm anytime in the near future?” Loki asked.

Wanda paused.

“I thought as much. Calm yourself and we will continue tomorrow.”

Jane shifted uncomfortably. “Actually, it’d be great if you could both come with me.”

“Why?” Wanda said suspiciously.

“I’d like to… study your power,” Jane said. “Tony didn’t get much off Strucker’s servers, so we don’t know what they did you you, but if I can understand it—”

“No.” Wanda glared. “I will not—not be your lab rat—”

“Wanda,” Loki said. “That is not what she meant.”

“Really? You’re not going to stick me in a cage and inject me with toxic substances in the name of science?” she snarled.

“Of course not,” Jane snapped, glaring right back at the other woman. “I’m a scientist, not a sadist! There will be nothing invasive and nothing done without your consent. I am only curious. Aren’t you?”

Wanda hesitated.

“I have been working with Mr. Stark and Doctors Banner, Foster, and Cho for some time now,” Loki said. “They have never kept me against my will, nor done anything I did not acquiesce to. If that helps.”

“Fine,” Wanda said. “But only if Pietro agrees.”

“He already has,” Jane said. “Apparently he has a bit of a crush on Helen.”

Wanda groaned and followed her out the door.

Helen and Pietro were already in the labs. Pietro was poking around one of Tony’s cluttered tables in their shared work space, while Helen worked quickly at her center table. Her fingers were quick and deft; her liquid dark eyes focused absolutely on her vials and sensors. Jane didn’t want to admit it but she’d come to love watching Helen work.

“Good, you got her,” Helen said without looking up.

“L-Liam, too,” Jane said, almost forgetting. “They were training. I thought it could be useful to look at their energy levels side-by-side. And possibly see if there’s an impact on the readings when one of them is… doing their thing… nearby.”
“What about me?” Pietro said.

Helen barely spared him a glance. “Tony built you a super-special treadmill.” She pointed into the corner. The treadmill was an enclosed box, completely climate controlled, with a treadmill inside designed to go faster and take far more wear than anything on the market. Jane had to shake her head—even on a project as massive as this had been, Tony had managed to build their idea in three days and still make it look elegant.

“I can outrun any treadmill,” Pietro scoffed.

“Not mine,” Tony said, dropping down through the ceiling. He landed with a thud, winced, and came over to them, wiping grease off his hands with a rag. When he had engineering projects, he preferred to wear fitted sleeveless shirts and cargo pants. No matter how many times she saw this, Jane was always a little surprised by the amount of muscle he hid underneath his tailored suits. “Like Helen said, it’s a special treadmill. You’re with me and Dr. Jekyll over there.”

Pietro grinned at his sister.

There was a blur. Papers rustled and flew in the air. Pietro reappeared next to the glass door in the treadmill. “Here, you mean?”

“I can’t wait to put him in his place,” Tony said under his breath. Jane snorted—she must’ve been the only one to hear that—and he tossed the rag aside. He and Bruce met up at the treadmill and started talking to Pietro.

“Wanda,” Helen said, stepping around her table. “I’m Dr. Cho. You can call me Helen.”

“You created the… cradle,” Wanda said, glancing over at the back wall, where one of the three cradles in existence was tucked beneath the windows. “You saved my brother’s life.”

“You saved his life.” Helen squinted at the label on a bottle of something, then reached behind her and slapped one of her machines. “I just helped finish the process. The thing about being a biological engineer is that you don’t get to be on the front lines of anything. You don’t protect people; you help them recover from their own messes and bad decisions.”

“But a necessary task,” Wanda said. “I am grateful.”

Helen nodded once, taking it as her due. “Have a seat, please.”

“Liam?” Jane said. “Over here?”

He took a seat next to Wanda and Jane copied Helen’s movements, gently placing electrodes at Loki’s temples and wrists. She was learning a lot about Helen’s field every week they worked together. Jane supposed she could spend more time with Tony, but there hadn’t been any new data on Einstein-Rosen bridges in months and with Loki cut off from Asgard, he couldn’t help. He was also reluctant to attempt worldwalking with a human in tow, though she’d gotten some fascinating insights about quantum tunneling from watching him do it in the lab over short distances. But honestly, she liked working with Helen enough that the break didn’t chafe like it normally would.

And she’d gotten quite comfortable around Loki in the process. His sense of humor was sarcastic, dry, and often cruel, but she knew there was no real malice behind it, and he often made her laugh. It helped that he was brilliant. Far smarter than Thor, she had to admit.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t relax nearly so much around Wanda.
The thought of the brunette woman reaching into her head made Jane terrified. She couldn’t stand the thought of losing control like that. Her brain was her best weapon and the most valuable thing she owned.

Darcy had told her about her tiny experiments in magery (Jane forcibly kept her brain from running off down that tangent again and toying with all the possible implications) and that she and Wanda had been getting along tentatively well. Jane understood why Darcy was making an effort to include Wanda and make her feel at home, which seemed to involve shared breakfasts, but she hadn’t been able to bring herself to go.

“All set,” Helen said. “Liam, if you could cast a simple illusion. And Wanda, please… hold this up in the air in front of you.” She held out a pencil.

Wanda flicked her fingers. Red light flashed and it lifted out of Helen’s hand to hover between them. Loki cocked his head and a tiny figure appeared in the air, clinging desperately to the pencil with both hands. On closer examination, Jane realized it was a caricature version of Secretary Ross, and laughed.

Helen allowed herself a thin smile. “Very amusing, Hillworth. Sit still. This might take a moment.”

Jane sat back and watched them.

Loki looked bored, Wanda nervous. (Good.) Back in the corner, Pietro was moving briskly (for him; the pace was blindingly fast by anyone else’s standards) on the treadmill while Tony and Bruce adjusted something on the control panel. Helen was intent on her readings, bending over a computer. She glanced up, noticed Jane’s attention, and shot her a quicksilver smile.

Jane smiled back.

Helen looked down.

Wait. Shit.

Jane felt her eyes widen and looked down. She picked up a black box with three short rods sticking out of the end and aimlessly fiddled; it was nice to have something to do with her hands because the thoughts in her head were concerning.

When did she decide that Helen’s smile was so pretty? When had she started to wonder what it would be like to kiss her?

_I need to talk to Darcy. I can’t handle people on a platonic level_, Jane thought, panic rising. She’d tried dating once, in high school and the first few years of college. Fallen hard and been wrecked when he left her for some biochem major out of Duke. Thor was the only time after that, and in hindsight, that was definitely driven at least in part by the fact that she’d been looking through a keyhole her whole life and he could’ve thrown the door wide open. Both relationships ended badly. And on top of that she’d always thought she was straight—

Jane squeezed too hard on the black box in her hand.

It hissed and cracked and shot a beam of yellow light from the three prongs on the end that just barely grazed Loki’s calf.

He yelped and jumped up. The electrodes were torn away and so were his illusions.

_Both_ illusions. The one of Ross, and the one he kept over himself.
Jane froze, eyes wide, as Helen and Wanda realized they had not some random Asgardian standing in front of them but its disgraced prince himself.
It was the first time in a long time that Loki remembered being genuinely afraid.

Only for a few seconds, true. Before he mastered himself, before he remembered he was Loki Silvertongue, Loki Liesmith, son of Laufey and student of Frigga Void-witch, and he could (and had) faced the worst the Nine Realms could offer.

But he had just had his spells stripped away for several seconds. By a Midgardian device.

So he believed the four heartbeats’ worth of fear was justified.

He thanked the Norns it hadn’t torn away the illusion that hid his Jotun skin and eyes. That spell was so deeply ingrained in him, so closely woven with his biology, that it was ever-so-slightly painful to undo it. Even for a short time. His natural resting state was disguised as Loki Odinson, not Loki Laufeyson, and evidently the device was not strong enough to reveal that part of him, for which he was grateful.

But the gratitude was overshadowed by fury, because they had made this thing and not told him.

And also Helen, Wanda, and Pietro were now aware of the grand deception, which meant he may have to kill them.

“You’re—you’re—” Helen was, for the first time in their acquaintance, speechless.

He felt Wanda’s power surge with barely enough time to block the blow. Sheer brute force crumpled against Loki’s shields. He gritted his teeth and threw more seidr into the barrier; without time to properly prepare, his protection was crude and consumed too much energy. Tables flipped. Papers flew. Jane screamed.

Pietro slammed out of the treadmill.

Loki’s temper snapped.

He released his seidr in a wave, shaped only by his iron will. The effort was immense, but he was better than that, and in an instant Wanda and Pietro were frozen inside tall cubes of enchanted ice. Each had perhaps an hour of air inside, but their abilities were useless. Any spell involving ice and cold had always come more easily to him than the other mages on Asgard, but since he’d discovered his true heritage, it was as if his visit to Jotunheim and his use of the Casket of Ancient Winters had made this affinity even greater.

Jane stood up slowly.

Loki unclenched his fists as the tables, papers, and computers Wanda had knocked aside or shattered picked themselves up off the floor and slid back into their places. Broken equipment repaired; papers restacked.

“The fuck…” Tony trailed off, looking around.

Loki turned on Jane. “Really? Could your timing possibly have been worse?”
“Mr. Stark, Secretary Ross is on the line,” Friday said. “Do you require a security detail?”

“Apparently, it could’ve,” Bruce muttered.

“No, Friday, I’ve got this. Put him on hold,” Tony said, sharp eyes cataloguing the almost-fixed room. “So. Loki. When are you going to let them out?”

“When I have adequate time to prepare a more elegant binding spell so Miss Maximoff will not destroy the tower attempting to kill me,” Loki snapped, and looked at Helen.

She’d ducked behind a large metal device whose purpose Loki had never bothered to learn, but now she stepped out, examining everything with an impassive face. Her control was good, but Loki saw her tells—pulse pounding, eyes wide, unmistakable tension written in her posture.

“A pleasure to meet you, Dr. Cho,” he said with a cutting smile.

“Loki, that’s not helping.” Bruce elbowed him in the ribs. “Play nice. For five minutes.”

“If you’re even capable,” Tony said. “Helen—”

“I’m not an idiot.” Helen crossed her arms. There was a barely-audible tremble to her voice. “You’re clearly well aware of the fact that you have a mass-murdering psychopath with a literal god complex hiding in your tower—”

“Technically, he has sociopathic tendencies,” Bruce said. “We could probably diagnose him with antisocial personality disorder. Impulsivity, disregard for rules, difficulty empathizing—”

“I know the symptoms!” Helen snapped. “That is also irrelevant!”

“We can explain,” Jane said, raising her hands. Loki glanced over. She was wide-eyed, almost panicked, focused completely on Helen. And the look Helen gave her in return—that was the pain of a betrayal.

He hadn’t realized they’d gotten so close.

“Please,” Helen said. “Immediately.”

“I’m impressed,” Loki said, leaning back on a table with a sneer. Even now, disdain was the easiest reaction. “Most mortals would scream and run in this circumstance.”

“Running would do nothing except give you the pleasure of dragging me back here,” Helen retorted. “Which I won’t do.”

“I like her,” Loki said to his teammates.

“Great. We’re all getting along splendidly.” Bruce shook his head.

“I’m right here,” Helen said, leaning forward and waving at them.

Jane shifted, drawing their attention. “Helen—wait, Loki, can the twins hear me?”

He made a gesture that vaguely imitated a runic modification to his spell. “They can now.”

“Thanks. Helen, listen. Loki came to us through Darcy a year ago,” she said in a rush. “He wanted a safe place to lie low on Earth, and in exchange he offered information—about Thanos.”
Wanda and Pietro both stopped their efforts to break out of their prisons, eyes wide.

“After the events in—New Mexico, I returned to Asgard,” he said. No emotion to his tone whatsoever. He was not asking for their pity—he never asked for anyone’s pity. “I attempted to use the Bifrost—the Einstein-Rosen bridge—to destroy one of the nine realms and end a war many times older than myself between the Aesir and another race of the cosmos, the Jotnar, who once invaded Midgard and have a tendency to embark upon bloody conquering sprees whenever their civilization grows strong enough. Thor stopped me by shattering the Bifrost. I fell into the void between the realms.

“Thanos found me after the void spat me back out. I was much weakened, mentally unstable from—prior circumstances, and vulnerable. He overwhelmed me and used the scepter to turn me to his cause.”

“Think about it,” Jane urged. Helen, at least, looked hesitant instead of hostile. Pietro’s expression was nothing but shocked inside the ice; Wanda looked suspicious, but that was preferable to wrath. “Wasn’t the invasion odd? Tony, how did Darcy put it?”

“A choke-point invasion,” Tony said with a shrug. “Army with connected heads. Remember how Selvig built a fail-safe into the blue death cube? Yeah, that was Loki’s idea, and we know from both Maria and Selvig that there was no room for independent action under the scepter’s control. He also tried as much as he could that SHIELD was lying and keeping secrets, which, granted, I was already digging into, but basically there was a lot of weird and/or inconsistent shit and once we realized, it seemed obvious.”

“And he’s been working with you ever since.” Helen had relaxed a little.

“I was more of a… barely tolerated roommate at first,” Loki said with a smirk. “Little more than a prisoner. The Avengers are not fools.”

“But eventually, he hadn’t killed us and Maria hadn’t shot him, so we ended up friends,” Tony said. “No bracelets yet, though. Not that close.”

Helen ignored this—justifiably, in Loki’s opinion. “And he’s disguised as this fake person you created.”

Tony shrugged. “I’m a hacker, I’ve got friends in low places, it really wasn’t hard to create a false identity. Although I’m pretty sure Ross can tell it’s not up to scratch.”

“Any other secrets I should know about?” Helen said. “A crazy wife in the attic?”

“Good Brontë reference,” Bruce said.

“Ryan Dessen is the Winter Soldier,” Jane blurted.

Helen flinched. “I was joking!”

Jane looked down. “…Oh.”

Loki was getting a headache.

“Shit,” Helen breathed, eyes snapping back to him. “And you’ve been keeping him disguised. James Buchanan Barnes and Loki, two of the most wanted people on the planet, have been living a few floors over my head for the last few months.”
“Indeed we have. And you’ve yet to be murdered in your sleep.” Loki spread his hands and did not miss the miniscule flinch to her shoulders when he did so. He hid a smirk.

“Thanks for that,” Helen said slowly.

“Helen…” Jane took a deep breath. “What are you going to do?”

Helen stared at her.

Tony stepped forward and met her eyes. “Because—we like you, but we really can’t let you tell anyone this.”

“So what, you’ll lock me up?” Helen shook her head. “Good luck with that.”

“We faked Maria’s death once,” Tony said.

“In the middle of a war. People don’t just randomly die. Especially not scientists. You can’t kill me.” Helen crossed her arms again.

Loki smiled. “We don’t have to. I could break into your mind, rewrite your memories, and you’d walk away with no recollection of the last ten minutes whatsoever.”

Helen paled.

“But I would prefer not to take that course, because I have been violated in that manner before and it’s not something I would wish on a person I consider an ally,” he said in the iron-hard voice that he’d learned as a general and spymaster. The one that made it perfectly clear he meant every word. “Instead I am giving you an opportunity to choose to keep this secret.”

It went unsaid that their (his) vengeance would be brutal should she betray them.

Helen closed her eyes for a long moment. “This is… a lot to take in.”

“If it helps, I trust him,” Jane said quietly.

Helen looked at her. “It does.”

For a moment, they were all silent. Tony managed to look gloriously bored; Jane and Bruce’s anxiety was palpable. Loki feigned disinterest as well and used the opportunity to strengthen the bindings holding the twins in place.

Pietro slapped the ice. Let us out, he mouthed.

Loki considered it.

He reached down and started tracing runes on the table with his hand, barely paying attention to the questions Helen was now firing at Tony, Bruce, and Jane, asking them for details on how exactly they decided to trust Loki. That was unimportant. He had to concentrate to accomplish this task—one spell had to be in place the second the other was released, or the twins would escape.

He wasn’t going to bind their powers. He found himself wanting to trust them, and the best way to learn if you could trust someone was to do so and create a contingency plan should they do something idiotic.

If they did anything aggressive, they’d find themselves bound like Fenrir, the deadly wolf-monster Loki had accidentally released from prison in his youth, and who had subsequently been restrained
once more with ancient relics that would hold him until the Nine Realms collapsed.

With a last flick of his fingers, Loki dispelled his ice traps.

Pietro sucked a deep breath of air. “You were trying to suffocate me, you asshole!” he shouted.

“You should have had at least an hour of breathing—ah,” Loki said, suddenly realizing. “You were using your enhanced metabolic rate and speed to try and escape, were you not?”

“Yes.”

“The air inside your binding was used up more quickly than I calculated,” Loki said. “Apologies. Killing you was never my intention.”

Wanda was glaring at him. “But lying was.”

“In Midgardian lore, I am named the God of Lies. You really ought not to be act as if it’s a surprise.”

She almost smiled.

“So, Helen,” Tony said. “What’s it gonna be?”

“I’ll keep your secret,” Helen said with a shrug. Her calm was artificial but convincing. Loki was reluctantly impressed. “Like I said. I knew when I started working here that it’d involve keeping secrets. And quite frankly, he’s probably our best shot at stopping Thanos.” She examined Loki. “You seem like the sort of person who’s fairly vindictive.”

He smirked. “How astute.” There was no deception in Helen’s face or voice; he believed her, and was glad there was no immediate need to break her mental shields. Loki wouldn’t regret doing so if forced, but he wanted to avoid that situation. It would make things difficult between him and the other Avengers—make it more real to them that he could leave them all (except perhaps Vision) drooling idiots and walk out of here in the span of an hour.

“And you?” Tony said, looking at the twins. “Not that you could escape him if you say no, so…”

In reality, they likely could. If Loki had to keep Wanda contained for longer than a few weeks, her power could outlast his. The effort of blocking her connection to her power diminished his seidr while her strength wouldn’t be weakened in the least. But, of course, he wouldn’t tell them that.

“So we don’t really have a choice,” Wanda said. She’d be the harder to convince. She felt everything too deeply.

“It’s no choice at all,” Pietro said. “Dr. Cho said it first. Thanos has magic, he has magic, he’s out for blood.”

“Unless he’s lying, and he’s actually a spy,” Wanda retorted.

There was a pause.

“If he wanted us dead, we probably would be by now,” Tony said. “And Thanos would rather have us dead than alive when he shows up. Strategically.”

Unless it made you martyrs for a resistance, Loki thought, but knew better than to say it. He would only weaken an argument made in his favor.

“Will you let me look in your mind?” Wanda said to him. “To see if you are indeed on Earth’s side.”
Loki let a bit of the killer in him rise to the surface when he looked at her. “I believe you can deduce the answer to that yourself.”

Wanda swallowed hard but did not break his gaze. *Impressive.* Mortals were certainly bolder than he’d have given them credit for, before all this.

“Make up your minds, I haven’t got all day,” he said, thinking about the list of things he’d been slowly compiling for the last few weeks. All of them had to be gathered in secret, and while it was simple, he made an effort to exhibit no suspicious behavior to the Avengers. No need to complicate an arrangement that was going well.

“What else do you have to do, murder children?” Pietro muttered.

Loki grinned at him. “I could start with you.”

“I’m not a child!” Pietro protested.

“You are to me.” Loki smiled wider.

The twins exchanged a glance. A lot passed between them in that second. Loki wasn’t sure of the exact nature of their bond, but it was clearly powerful, and built on something more than the gifts they’d received from the mind-stone.

“We’ll fight with you,” Wanda said. “And keep your secret. Until Thanos is gone.”

He heard what she did not say—that after Thanos’ threat had been eliminated, she and Pietro made no promises. Loki chose not to address it. Once Thanos had been taken care of, Loki would play the victim to the people of Earth and pretend to throw himself to their judgment.

One thing he’d learned about Midgardians was that in the midst of their relentless innovation and change, they had remarkably short memories, and in many cases too forgiving for their own good. They would hate Thanos, and give him their gratitude. They would turn him and the rest of the Avengers into icons and heroes, much like Captain America had been in the wars of the previous century.

With Midgard’s support, Thor and Odin would have to step far more carefully when Loki returned.

“Excellent,” he said.

Pietro sighed heavily through his nose. “This is… a lot to take in.”

“Go on,” Tony said, waving his hand. “We’ll finish this later.”

“Thanks for agreeing to… work with us,” Bruce said. “I know it wasn’t easy.” He hesitated. “I’ve been a lab rat before, too. We’re not—that kind of scientists.”

Something in the twins softened when they looked at him. Bruce just had that effect on people. Loki always laughed inside when he saw the man’s simple charm at work. The others were too foolish to see the complexity inside.

“We know,” Wanda said softly, and then they left.

“Well,” Loki said. “Not that I don’t appreciate the drama, but—well, actually, I don’t. Jane, have you knowledge of Darcy’s whereabouts? Someone ought to inform her of this development.”

“I’d go, but—” Jane glanced at Helen. “I have work to do. She’s in her rooms. Probably still playing
music. You might have to get Friday to text her if she doesn’t hear you knock.”

“I need to take Ross’ call, then I’ll pass it on to Steve and the rest,” Tony said, rubbing a hand over his face. His characteristic patterned facial hair was looking ever-so-slightly paler than the rest of his hair, which had been its normal shade for a few days now. Loki did not mention this. “Bruce?”

“Sleep.” Bruce blinked a few times. “I put it off to held with Pietro, but… I need sleep.”

“Don’t we all.” Tony slung an arm around Bruce’s shoulders and dragged him out of the room, babbling about getting Bruce to look at the neural integration in Tony’s new line of prostheses, which had evidently met with success in its trial stages on the market.

Loki glanced around one last time, to ensure no trace of his magical battle remained, and followed them.

He glanced back once. Helen had sat rigidly in a chair while Jane hovered nervously around a lab table, biting her lip. It was perhaps the only time he’d seen Darcy’s best friend so truly flustered.

Loki filed the odd image away for later consideration, already fitting this new piece into his plans, and selecting a new set of runes for Darcy to learn.

“Loki.”

He paused.

Wanda and Pietro were waiting outside the lab.

Loki instantly went on guard, seidr rippling just under his skin, and said nothing.

The twins shared a glance. Something passed between them.

“Have you always been bonded in this way?” Loki asked. “Or is that a result of Hydra’s alterations?”

Pietro shrugged. “We’ve always been connected. I think…”

“That Hydra strengthened it,” Wanda finished.

Loki was curious about the exact nature of the bond, but that was a question for Helen and Bruce. He was a scholar insofar as it increased his power and gave him an edge—as Darcy said once, knowledge is power—and he had other things to spend time on than studying the twins. “If you intend to ambush me, I recommend actually surprising me.”

“It’s not an ambush,” Wanda said. “I…”

“She wants to know whether the scepter still has any influence on us,” Pietro said bluntly.

Wanda looked down. “I can’t… can’t trust myself.”

Loki saw the immense effort it took for her to open up like this. Neither of them trusted him, but she was willing to try.

He could never do that.

“It is not,” he said flatly. “Were there any lingering effect of the mind stone in your consciousness, I would not have permitted you to stay here.”
“You’re sure?” Pietro said.

Loki looked at him in a way that expressed precisely how imbecilic he considered that question.

Pietro rolled his eyes.

“So hating Stark so much… doing what Hydra told us…”

Loki decided to offer her something. “The scepter, when used indirectly, augments what is already there. You harbored a grudge against Stark for manufacturing the weapons that killed your parents. Foolishly, it must be said, since he never intended for those weapons to reach the hands of terrorists and arms dealers and shut down the weapons manufacturing division of this company when he discovered what was happening, but the grudge was very real. The scepter likely took that, amplified resentment into hatred so strong that you became open to allying with an organization that stands for things you disagree with.”

“Does it get easier?” Pietro asked. “To know… you’ve been… controlled like that.”

“You may trust yourselves now,” Loki said flatly. “It was no fault of yours. I expect for you it shall get easier.” He dripped sarcasm into his tone. “Now if you will excuse me, I have other things to do today.”

He turned on his heel and stalked away from them.

“Has it gotten easier for you?” Wanda called.

Loki paused.

“You already know the answer,” he said without turning, and continued on his way.
Chapter 149

Avengers Tower

April 2012

Jane went straight to Darcy.

Her best friend looked up from her book, took in the look on Jane’s face, and sat up straight.

“I need to talk to you,” Jane said.

“It’s about Helen, right? I was wondering how long this would take. I’d have bet on it except there’s no one to bet with and I didn’t know if you cared whether I said anything to anyone else.”

Jane blinked. “You—no, I don’t—what—”

“Jane, you’re not subtle,” Darcy said affectionately. “I’ve known you were crushing on Helen for a while.”

“Then why—”

Darcy shrugged and patted her sofa. “Wasn’t sure if you’d even want to talk about it. I was waiting for you to sort shit out. I assume shit has been sorted and it’s gossip time, so sit down.”

Jane couldn’t help laughing a little. “You win. Again.” She sat down, hands twisting nervously in her lap.

Darcy sat back and set her book aside. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Jane marshalled her thoughts.

“I always thought I was straight?” she blurted finally. “I mean—I’ve only ever liked guys.”


“Yeah… But statistically, I’m a lot more likely to be straight than… anything else.” Jane stubbornly choked back panic. “I don’t even know what it’s called—”

“Gay,” Darcy said. “The word you’re looking for is ‘gay’.”

Jane swatted her with a pillow. “I know that. I meant—like—there’s a p one? And something that starts with a d?”

“Oh. Demisexual, pansexual.” Darcy shrugged. “I mean, it doesn’t honestly matter all that much. You like who you like, and if they like you back, kiss them, if they don’t, back off. Simple.”

“But…” Jane didn’t even know what she was objecting to, exactly. Darcy’s point made total sense. “I just… like things classified.”

“If you want to pick an orientation to call yourself, you’re gonna have to do research and sort it out yourself,” Darcy said gently. “I can’t tell you. But I’d guess demi—that’s where you have to have some sort of emotional attachment to a person before you can see them as sexually attractive.”
Jane cocked her head. That fit her data. The three men she’d ever been attracted to—she’d worked with them, been friends with them, laughed at their jokes, been interested in their interests. She could recognize the features and body shapes that were considered ‘attractive’ or ‘sexy’ even though it didn’t turn her on the way her college associates had said.

Darcy snorted. “You’re going over every human interaction you’ve ever had right now, aren’t you?”

Jane grinned a little. “I mean… yes.”

“Score seven thousand nine hundred and two for Darcy Lewis,” Darcy crowed, slapping the couch. “Damn, I’m good.”

“Okay, but how do I… tell her?” Jane said. “Should I? What if it disrupts the team? What if—”

“Yo, calm down,” Darcy said, sitting up again. She reached out and covered Jane’s hand in hers. Jane was grateful—she’d never have thought to reach out, never would’ve thought it would help, but the contact was small and simple and it did. Darcy always knew what to do in situations like this. “Breathe. So if you have two straight people, man and woman, working together, and one of them asks the other out and the recipient says no, if they’re mature and logical they can just go back to being friends. The one who asked does the thing they should, which is respect that their crush said no and move the fuck on. Same thing here, except, I’m not gonna lie, your odds aren’t good, because something like ninety-five or ninety-six percent of the human population is straight and cis. But you’ll never know if you don’t just ask.”

“I just… ask?” Jane shook her head. She wanted a plan, something she could control. She wanted to know.

“Can’t slap an electrode on someone to read their sexual orientation, Jane,” Darcy said, grinning. Then she paused. “Wait, actually, I bet between Loki and Tony they could sort something out that tells that… weird.”

“Oh,” Jane said. “I forgot to tell you—Loki has a secret about his identity that we’re letting him keep, and Helen and Wanda and Pietro know about Loki now. And about James.”

“What?” Darcy sat bolt upright. Every trace of the funny, goofy friend vanished. If Jane didn’t know her so well, she’d be scared of the look on Darcy’s face. “How did this happen? What secret—okay, you’re not freaking out, so I assume Loki didn’t kill anyone.”

“How do you know Wanda didn’t kill anyone?” Jane said. “Or Tony—”

“My money’s on Loki in that fight for ruthlessness, experience, and skill,” Darcy said. She was relaxing. “He’s like ten centuries old. What happened?”

“I, um. Got distracted,” Jane said, not knowing where to look. “Thinking about… things. Helen was running some tests on Loki and Wanda; Tony and Bruce were working with Pietro, and I… kind of shot Loki with a thing that disabled his illusions.”

Darcy blinked.

“It was an accident,” Jane insisted. “Everything worked out; we explained it to the twins and Helen and nothing’s broken, even, because Loki fixed it all, and they’re going to keep the secret—”

“Back up,” Darcy said. “You have a thing that cancels seidr?”

“I—oh, yeah, Tony and I have been working on it for months.” Belatedly, Jane realized she
should’ve told Darcy this. If not before, then definitely when Darcy found out that she could do tiny little spells.

“For what purpose?” Darcy said. There was something hard in her eyes. “Because if Tony is planning to use it on Loki—”

“He would,” Jane said. “Probably. If he had to. But it’s for Thanos. If we can—can work against him, weaken his seidr… Loki already lost to him once.”

“So you’re designing a potential weapon to use against Thanos and you haven’t told anyone?” Darcy said.

Jane frowned at her. “We didn’t know if it would work. This is so far outside any science anyone else on the planet has ever done, I can’t even explain—it’s so hypothetical I don’t even fully understand what I’m doing, and what I’m doing is trying to build a massive anti-mage-weapon, so that’s probably not a good thing. But it worked.” She was only just now letting herself process how exciting it was. There’d been fear and worry and then her need to talk to Darcy, before, but most of that was sorted and now—Jane had done it. She’d told Tony what he had to make the weapon do, she’d figured out enough about seidr that she could at least disrupt an ongoing spell. “Darcy, it worked,” she repeated, laughing now at the sheer impossibility. Then— “I have to talk to Tony about this.”

“Whoa whoa whoa, chill,” Darcy said. “I need like three more questions, ish, and then you need sleep at some point today because I went in your room to get my hoodie back and the bed was made, which you never do, so clearly you haven’t slept in there since Sunday because Tony’s cleaning bots only go once a week—”

“That’s what it is,” Jane said. “I never got why my bed made itself, we don’t have cleaning staff—”

Darcy choked, then started laughing. “How you even functioned before I started interning for you I will never understand. Did Loki seem—mad?”

“He was livid,” Jane said. “But he controlled it rather well. He did threaten to wipe Helen’s memories.”

“I’m mostly surprised he didn’t just do it automatically,” Darcy muttered.

“He said—he said he’s been violated in that way before, and wouldn’t wish the experience on anyone he wants as an ally,” Jane said.

Darcy snorted. “So basically he knows that would cause serious interpersonal issues here—well, more serious interpersonal issues, because God knows we’ve got enough of those running around this tower already—so he was trying to not get himself thrown out of here?”

Jane considered. “That seems accurate.”

“Okay…” Darcy trailed off, thinking hard. “And… Helen? The twins? You trust them?”

“I’m not the best read of people,” Jane said. “But Tony and Bruce and Loki all believed them, so yes. The twins will at least work with us until Thanos is taken down.”

“We can win them over before then,” Darcy said. “And who knows if they even survive.”

Jane blinked.
“Of all the combat members of this team, they’ve got the least experience and are therefore most likely to die in a war,” Darcy said. “It’s just statistics.”

“Clint and Maria and Sharon are normal,” Jane argued.

“They’ve each got decades of focused study and practice, not to mention plenty of experience in life-and-death combat situations, that Pietro and Wanda don’t.” Darcy shrugged. “Everyone on this team has been through an alien invasion already, and lived, except the twins.”

“Fair point.” Jane still didn’t think it was a normal thing to say. The kind of cold calculation that would offend almost anyone else in her acquaintance.

“And this… secret?”

Jane let it all out in a rush, everything she should’ve said before. Granted, it hadn’t been very long since they confronted Loki, only a few days (she really did need to sleep more; she didn’t know how many days exactly) but Darcy should’ve known as soon as it happened.

She let out a breath. “So… Loki’s DNA says he’s not Asgardian but he won’t let you study it? He won’t say… where exactly he’s from?”

“Pretty much.” Jane shrugged. “Thor thinks—thought—of them as brothers, so maybe Loki’s… adopted? Some other race but Odin took him in? He can’t be that different, genetically; he looks like any Asgardian. Though Thor said he’s unusually tall.”

“Tony agreed to not push any farther?” Darcy said skeptically.

Jane smiled. “He didn’t like it. He’s a pusher. But he went along with it because Loki seemed pretty desperate and also if he hadn’t I’m fairly sure Loki would’ve erased all knowledge of the whole encounter from our heads and from Friday.”

“True.” Darcy took a breath. “That’s… a lot to take in.”

Jane waited.

“You’re sure it’s that simple a secret?”

“It’s DNA, not nuclear launch codes,” Jane said. “If he doesn’t want to tell us where he’s from… I mean, full disclosure, I’d give a lot to know, but that’s his prerogative to tell. Or not.”


Suddenly she glanced up at the door. Then sighed and turned back to Jane. “I’ll have Friday play back the security footage for me from the lab today, no more questions. Do you need to talk about anything else?”

Jane ran back over their conversation. “No.” She considered, then leaned forward and gave Darcy an extremely awkward hug. Awkward, but pleasant. “Thank you,” she said quietly when they separated. “For… helping. Being my friend. I know I’m not… an easy friend to have.”

“Neither of us is,” Darcy said with a grin. “It’s my pleasure, really—who else would put up with my crazy ass?”

“I have no clue,” Jane said honestly.

“You suck. Go on, go geek out with Tony,” Darcy said, still smiling.
Avengers Tower

April 2012

Jane walked right by.

Loki watched her go, glamoured and pressed against the wall outside Darcy’s rooms. He let the eavesdropping spell slide away.

Such interesting things they spoke of. He did not fully understand the Midgardian inclination to classify every type of sexual preference or criterion for choosing potential mates, but it seemed that Jane was undergoing some kind of self-realization, and he’d almost left to give them their privacy when he guessed that their conversation would turn to the events in the lab. Which it had.

Jane’s explanation, to Darcy, was useful. And trustworthy. She was a terrible liar even if she had a reason to lie to Darcy about this, and Loki couldn’t conceive of one.

He couldn’t deny that he was relieved that he would not be forced to ask Tony Stark some pointed questions. Perhaps with mental compulsion involved. It was well within his skill set, of course, but to force the truth in such a way—it would only make them more likely to use the weapon on him in the future.

And he couldn’t blame them for at least considering that it would make an excellent contingency plan. He’d have done the same. In fact, he had been planning precisely how he would negate each Avenger’s advantage in combat should the occasion ever arise, and he’d simply have to find a way to circumvent this device as well. It seemed weak—his illusions were simple spells—but if it was ever strong enough to impact Thanos… well. Then he would perhaps have a problem. Best to learn how to minimize its effect on him now, while it was weak.

Darcy stepped out of her room, closed her door, and leaned on it. “Loki,” she said quietly. “I know you’re here.”

He canceled the illusion that hid him and smiled at her unkindly. “Entertaining gentleman callers so late? My, how scandalous.”

“Cut the crap. How long were you eavesdropping?”

He shrugged. “Long enough to know more than I should about Jane’s convoluted romantic aspirations.”

“That conversation had nothing to do with you.”

“Such is the danger of eavesdropping, you may overhear things not intended for your ears… Whatever shall I do?”

Darcy glared.

Loki gave. Slightly. “I turned my attention away for that part of your conversation,” he said.
Honestly. Letting her see his honesty. “I am aware that it has nothing to do with me.”

“But you knew she’d tell me the truth about that device thing they’ve got, and you needed to make sure we’re not planning to take away your magic and lock you up?”

“That is the approximate truth.”

Darcy slumped against the doorframe. “I really want to be pissed at you but I’m so tired I can’t manage it.”

“The Norns have blessed me,” he said sarcastically.

Darcy laughed, quick and sharp.

*She really is lovely.* Not in a classical way, and not as overtly stunning as Sif, or Natasha, or even Jane. But Loki found her features pleasing, and at any rate, it was her mind that set her apart from other women.

He wanted her.

And he was tired of waiting for everything he wanted.

With one quick movement, Loki pushed off the wall and turned, leaning against the door his palms pressed flat to it on either side of Darcy’s head. Caging her. Metaphorically—she could slip aside at any moment.

She raised an eyebrow. “Is this supposed to intimidate me?”

He smirked. “I can hear your heart racing, you know.”

“Maybe I’m scared.”

“I think you know better than that by now.” Loki leaned closer. “Tell me, Darcy. If Jane had told you that device was intended for me… if she told you she and Tony were making *me* a cage… whose side would you have taken?”

Darcy paused.

Loki’s smirk grew. He’d guessed right. When her anger had bled into her voice and she *demanded* to know who the device had been intended for…

That was when he’d known.

“Whose do you think?” Darcy challenged. Her heart was pounding but her eyes were clear, meeting his squarely, and there was no fear in them at all.

Loki brushed his right thumb over her cheekbone. He loved the way it brought a flush to her skin, loved that he was having such an effect on her, loved feeling drunk on being *finally* so close to her—

“Mine,” he said.

Darcy was silent.

He could see her hesitation. He leaned closer still. Until he could see tiny gold flecks in her hazel eyes. But he let her make the final leap.
“Fuck it,” Darcy breathed, and closed the last few inches between them.

This.

This was what he’d been waiting for.

Loki pressed his body against hers. Parted his lips slightly and closed his eyes when she opened hers, lost himself to this feeling—

She finally lifted her hands from her sides. Ran them up his chest, over his shoulders, cupping the back of his neck and hair. Her fingers were deft and light and warm against his skin. He felt himself becoming harder.

Footsteps.

Loki reached around her, found her doorknob, and turned it.

The door opened.

She would’ve staggered back but he caught her, lifted her off the ground, and she wrapped her legs around his hips and it felt glorious, it was as good as every battle he’d ever won, every prank he’d ever played or bit of vengeance he’d gotten, and he closed the door gently behind them.

Darcy pulled away.


She leaned her head on his collarbone. “Wait. Just—wait.”

He did.

“God, I’m so stupid,” she muttered, and he could feel her muscles tensing, preparing to pull away. He tightened his grip on her.

“Loki. Let me down.”

He pressed his lips to the side of her neck. “What was that?”

“Fuck—seriously—Loki.”

He let her slip from his arms and leaned back against the door. He knew his eyes were heavy with desire and if she glance down she’d see the evidence of it there, too.

Darcy squeezed her eyes shut. “Okay, I really, really hate to do this right now, because you can probably tell I was enjoying kissing you, you’re a really good kisser, but I have to ask—you’re not looking for a mistress, are you? A call girl to pass the time?”

Loki had never heard the term ‘call girl’ before, but he knew enough English, and had enough common sense, to guess its meaning. “No,” he said. “But the real question is whether you’re brave enough to trust my answer.”

Darcy looked up at him, and normally she tucked her cunning away behind a false expression but now she let it shine in her eyes.

There you are.
“God of lies,” she murmured, coming closer. This time it was Darcy who leaned against him, and Loki swore in his head, because he wanted to kiss her again almost more than he could stand. “Yeah, it’s pretty damn hard to trust you.” She traced a finger over his lips. Loki tried not to think about her hands in other places. “Especially since you have some secret history.”

He should’ve known this would come up. Loki closed his eyes.

“Hey.” Darcy poked him. “I’d rather know there’s a secret, and trust you’ve got a good reason for keeping it, than be lied to and find out later. Don’t tell me what it is. But I’m glad I know it exists.”

He pulled her closer. “If I were a better man, I’d say I don’t deserve you,” he said softly.

“Pah, life’s not about what you deserve.”

“Very true.”

“So what do you want from me, then?” Loki could see that she was deadly serious. He had to answer this question intelligently. “If not a call girl. Seeing as I’ll be dead within a hundred years, while you’ll still look the same.”

He couldn’t believe this was happening. In some painful corner of his mind he’d thought—he’d thought she would reject him again. Just like everyone else always had. Friends, family, lovers. That he might be enough for someone, and someone like Darcy—that she might care for him—

“I thought I was beyond wanting this,” he breathed, lifting one hand to cup her face. “Wanting—to care for someone who cares about me in return.”

“Why do you sound pissed about that?”

He laughed, and he meant it to come out cynical, but instead it sounded—broken. “Caring is a weakness.”

“So not ‘better to have loved and lost than never loved at all’?”

Loki thought about all the people he’d loved—platonic love, familial love—and the pain when they turned away from him for something better. Which was, in many cases, Thor. How it turned him against his brother, even now. “Most days I wish I’d never cared at all.”

“So you do care about me, then.”

They were both dancing around saying it. Love. And Loki knew that, for himself, it was because love of this kind was such a foreign concept. He suspected he would not recognize the feeling. “More than I thought myself capable,” he said. Both of his hands were cupping her face now. “More than I should.”

Darcy laughed breathlessly. Loki narrowed his eyes—he’d made her breathless, and they had yet to remove any clothing.

Her hands had been resting on his shoulders, but she slid them down over his chest, then his stomach, then along the waistband of his Midgardian trousers, and all the time her eyes never left his. She was smirking. Enjoying the effect she had on him.

Loki smiled back with just as much cunning.

“Let’s just take it day by day then, shall we?” he said. “Since you are short-lived and I am not.” He
let his left hand roam down along her ribcage, then around her lower back, sliding his pinky finger inside her trousers just slightly. Her breathing hitched, and his smile widened. “We shall see where this thing takes us.”

“Just tell me one thing.” Darcy shot him a mischievous grin. “Wherever you’re from—you can have sex with humans, right? It doesn’t violate some cross-species intercourse taboo?”

“It is rare,” Loki said. “But it has occurred, long in the past, with the consent of both parties.” _And in many instances, the consent of only the Jotun._ “Our species are similar enough that no, there is no taboo.”

“Good,” Darcy said. “Because I’ve been betting for a while you’re really good between the sheets, and it would suck to miss out on that at the last second.”

Loki kissed her again. It was, impossibly, better this time. His _seidr_ hummed in his veins and he felt hers responding, much, much weaker but every bit as enthusiastic, their magic singing an intoxicating duet as Darcy let him pick her up again and carry her toward her bedroom.

He almost wished he could feel guilty about the fact that should she know his true heritage, she would almost certainly have refused this.

But he was not that good a man.

Chapter End Notes

HERE IT IS!!! The bit we've all been waiting for! Of course, there are still some *cough* issues for them to work out...

(For those of my readers who like smut: This is as close as I'm going to get to writing any, sorry!)
Tony was up to his elbows in machine parts when Friday told him the twins had come to see him.

“Get a Mark 9 ready for deployment,” he said. “And have the Iron Legion on standby. If they so much as sneeze in the wrong direction, send in the Legion and call Loki. I don’t trust them not to kill me.” And he knew full well that without his suit, he was no match for even one of the Maximoff twins in a fight.

Once, that might have bothered him. But not anymore. He might not have superpowers, but he was more than a metal carapace with rockets in the shoulders.

“Yes, sir. Shall I send them in?”

“Go for it.”

When the twins walked into Tony’s private engineering lab, they both paused.

“Not what you were expecting?” he said, folding his arms.

“This doesn’t look like some rich dickhead’s private ’lab,’” Pietro said bluntly. “You know, we always thought you paid other people off to take credit for their success.”

Tony picked up a prototype prosthetic foot from a shelf next to him. It looked very real. “Yeah, that’s definitely how I got where I am. Riding on everyone else’s coattails, and faking it.”


Wanda elbowed him. “This is not the place for your Harry Potter obsession,” she hissed.

“Unfortunately, I can’t just shout _obliviate_ and make people forget things,” Tony said. “That’s Loki’s area of expertise.”

Pietro blinked. “You like Harry Potter?”

“Who doesn’t?” Tony said. “No, actually, don’t answer that question, because if it’s someone I know I’d never be able to look them in the face again.”

They both laughed—quick surprised sounds. Then they fell back into silence.

Tony watched them look around his lab, cataloguing the organized mess. Parts, machinery for his heavy lifting, a half-disassembled car in the back corner, three Iron Legion bodies lying gutted on a table for repairs, a shelf tucked up against the ceiling with Tony’s various awards and medals lined up inside. He liked having them there. As a reminder, and as motivation.

“Is there a reason you’re here?” Tony asked when the silence stretched awkwardly long. “Because honestly, I need to figure out this glitch in the Iron Legion before the end of this week— _in case we need a small robotic army to protect us from the United Nations_— and while I’m fond of this lab, I’m aware it’s not that interesting to anyone with an IQ below one forty.”

The twins did one of their Looks TM, heavily implying that they were arguing about who got to talk first.

More silence.

“Okay, let’s try again.” Tony frowned at them. “Is one of you gonna finally tell me why you hate my guts so much? Because it would actually be really great to clear that up so I can quit avoiding my penthouse in my tower.”

“You’re an asshole, for starters,” Wanda shot back.

“And water is wet.” Tony rolled his eyes and started to turn away. “If that’s all—”

“It’s not.”

He looked back. Pietro had crossed his arms. His pain was evident in his face and voice as he said, “You killed our parents.”

“Right, right. That line.” Tony had spent plenty of time building up the Obnoxious Billionaire Playboy façade. He understood why the twins had bought into it—why the world had—and didn’t really care. The people who mattered to him saw that while he was obnoxious, and a billionaire, and could justifiably have been called a playboy before—before Pepper—he was also a lot of other things. “If they were Hydra, I’m not going to apologize—”

“They weren’t Hydra.” Wanda’s voice was soft, but showed none of the emotion that her brother had. “They were good people. Normal people. Our town was bombed. We lay for three days in the rubble next to the hole in our apartment building our parents fell through. For three days—no food, no water, convinced every pebble shifting meant we were going to die. And the whole time…”

“We were staring at a dud shell,” Pietro finished. “With Stark Industries written on the side.”

Guilt was Tony’s first reaction. Then anger that he was feeling guilty over something that wasn’t his damn fault. “And suddenly it all makes sense,” he said, laughing a little. “You do realize that I didn’t deliberately sell weapons to terrorists and crime rings on the black market, right?”

“We do now,” Wanda said. “And… I suppose we did then. But it still came from you. That’s… why we hated you.”

Now that was new. “Past tense?”

“More or less,” Pietro said. “We still don’t like you much.”

“That’s understandable,” Tony said, putting the fake foot down with a thunk. “Most days, I don’t like me much either.” He took a breath. “I got out of the weapons business because I realized it was impossible to trust anyone except myself with anything I made that could do harm. There’s a reason I fought so hard to keep the Iron Man tech to myself, and a reason Stark Industries is currently making its billions off of advanced prosthetics, nanoengineering, and clean energy, among other, more conventional revenue paths.” He stopped himself from launching into a complex discussion of all the ways SI rolled in money; it wasn’t interesting to anyone who wasn’t a business major and he tended to lose people as soon as he started doing complicated math of that sort in his head. “So now I keep the really dangerous shit to myself and the Avengers.”

“You trust them.” Wanda had softened.

“They earned it.” Tony shot the twins a look.
Both of them shifted uncomfortably.

“And even then,” he continued, “it took… a while… before I got to that point. You should’ve heard the fights Steve and I used to get into. Not to mention the time Natasha shot me with a tranq dart—don’t look at me like that, it was years ago and *not* what you’re thinking. She’s a stunner but I’ve never even looked down that road.”

Pietro snorted.

“I’m… sorry we wanted to kill you,” Wanda said.

“Apology accepted.” Tony grinned. “I’d recommend you don’t try. You’d bring the Avengers down on your head, and I make them look awesome but even without me, that’s not a position you want to be in.”

“I noticed,” Wanda muttered, flexing her hands. Tony would’ve bet his company she was thinking about how easily Loki had stripped her of her power.

“Anything else?” he said. “No mutant slugs invading San Francisco, no aliens pumped up on solar radiation discovered hiding in Kansas…?”

Pietro was looking off to the side, where several glass cases held suits Tony was working on for the team. He hadn’t told anyone yet—they were mostly for the non-powered members, and unfinished.

“Do I get a suit?” he asked.

Tony started to say *hell no*, but then he thought about the challenge of designing something that could minimize friction, regulate body heat, stop most conventional weapons, possibly incorporate the anti-electricity tech he’d been developing against Thor’s eventual return, in case things went south… And of course, it would also have to look badass.

“Jury’s out,” he said. “Check back in a few days. How ‘bout you, Red Christmas?”

“Scarlet Witch is actually better,” Wanda muttered. “I… maybe something bulletproof?”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Tony grabbed a StarkPad and started drawing.

A minute later, he looked up. “You’re still here.”

“Excuse me,” Pietro said, but smiling a little, and then he towed his sister out of the room.

Tony’d already forgotten what he was working on before they showed up. He expanded the sketch to a holo in front of him, made it 3D, and walked around it, eyeing the preliminary design critically.

It was going to be pretty damn brilliant.

*I’m a genius*, he thought with satisfaction. “Friday, ask Pietro how he feels about blue.”
Chapter 152

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Avengers Tower

April 2012

Jane turned her mom’s ring compulsively around her right index finger. She didn’t wear it all the time, partly because she was absentminded and had already almost lost it three times (all three, Darcy had rescued the ring, on one memorable occasion from a Yorkshire terrier), and partly because she didn’t want it damaged. But it was a comfort to have around.

Especially in high stress situations.

She knew Darcy was right. She’d done extensive research, and the odds weren’t good that Helen was… that Helen would want a romance with another woman. Jane still wasn’t sure why she wanted a relationship with another woman, except that she did. And since it was looking more and more likely that they’d all be dead inside a year, she’d taken Darcy’s advice to heart.

But when she walked into the lab and found Helen curled up on one of Tony’s wide padded windowsills, nursing a mug of the tea she special ordered from Japan every month and staring out at the New York skyline, the speech she’d been rehearsing in her head completely vanished.

Helen blinked when the door fell shut and looked up. “Jane. Hi. Join me?”

Jane nodded and climbed onto the window seat across from Helen. She didn’t know where to look—her hands, Helen’s face, the floor, the mass spec, Pietro’s half-wrecked treadmill (one of Tony’s bots had gone rogue two days ago). After a few seconds of darting glances she turned and stared through the window at nothing.

Helen nudged Jane’s foot with hers. Jane jumped several inches off the bench.

“Are you okay?” Helen asked, frowning slightly.

“Um. Yes. Are you?” Jane asked.

“Better than okay, I can write a Nobel-worthy paper off of Pietro alone without even mentioning his name,” Helen said. “I’ve already got a course of study. Also, I’m pretty sure you’re not okay, since all of Darcy’s lessons in how to interact with other people have gone out the window. Did that douchebag come back to Earth?”

Jane blinked. “I—huh?”

Helen sipped her tea, dark eyes unwavering. “Darcy told me some of it. Thor might be a good fighter but evidently he’s an asshole to his girlfriends.”

“I’m not not okay because of him,” Jane blurted, and then winced. *You have a genius—level IQ, you’ve coauthored award-winning papers, you have an astrophysics theory named after you for heaven’s sake, and that’s the sentence you come up with? I’m not not okay?*

“Progress.” Helen sipped her tea again. “If you want to tell me why you’re not okay, I’m not going
anywhere. If you want to sit here in silence, I’m still not going anywhere, because I was here first, so if you want to be alone, do it somewhere else.”

Jane took a breath. “Willyougoouttodinnerwithme?”

Helen raised an eyebrow. “I’m fluent in three languages but none of them garbled English baby language. Try again, please.”

Jane tried again, slower.

Helen paused with her mug halfway to her lips.

Jane twisted the ring faster.

“I’m—okay. Did you just… like a date?” Other than Loki’s sudden appearance in the lab (also Jane’s fault), Jane had never seen Helen speechless. She was halfway proud that she’d managed to do it twice, halfway terrified, halfway about to laugh it off as a bad joke, and as confused about what to do next as by the prospect of making three halves equal a whole.

She nodded.

Helen set the mug down with a thunk.

There was silence.

“I, ah. Thought you were straight.”

“So did I,” Jane whispered. “Darcy said… demisexual?”

Helen’s lips quirked. “So you do like me. That’s flattering. I wasn’t sure.”

“What?”

“As I understand it, demisexual people require a strong emotional attachment to feel sexual or romantic attraction,” Helen said coolly. Jane had no clue but she didn’t think people’s voices were supposed to be cool in situations like this. “I couldn’t tell whether or not you had any sort of friendly feelings toward me whatsoever, but clearly I was wrong.”

Jane’s mouth opened and closed a few times before she managed “Apparently I haven’t improved as much as you and Darcy seem to think.”

“Mm.” Helen picked up her tea and took a long drink. Her face was unreadable but Jane noticed the slightest tremble in the hand that was holding the mug.

The silence grew unbearable. “I—look, okay, I know there’s not that many gay or lesbian or bi or whatever else people, and most of the population is straight and cisgender, I did my research—” so much research, because Jane was who she was, and she hadn’t been able to help herself— “so if you’re not interested in women, or in me, just say so and I’ll pretend this never happened, I don’t want to make anything awkward and I love working with you just as friends, but I had to ask and—”

“Jane. Stop.”

Jane stopped.

Helen set her half-full mug down and stood up in one graceful motion. “I need to make a phone call,” she said, and walked out of the room.
Jane didn’t know how long she sat on the windowsill. Long enough for steam to stop coming out of Helen’s discarded mug. Long enough that the shadows changed their length by several inches. No one else came into or out of the lab—Bruce had been playing some kind of board game with Loki and Clint and Maria when she went through the penthouse, and Tony was doing something related to his company. The three of them, plus Helen, were the only scientists allowed to operate out of this lab floor.

And Darcy was downstairs doing a workout with Steve. She’d stop in a heartbeat if she saw Jane right now—Jane knew that.

But she found herself not wanting human comfort. Human interaction of any kind, really. Sometimes it helped her; other times it didn’t. Jane had lived in her own skin long enough to know this was one of the latter times.

So when she finally uncurled her aching limbs, she didn’t think about how long one phone call could take, or about crying, or about Darcy, or anything with eyes and a voice and a mind. She thought about the implications of Loki’s ability to manipulate Higgs-Boson fields when combined with the Foster theory of interdimensional travel and the old dreams of faster-than-light travel, and Jane sat down with a massive pad of paper and thought about math.

Equations never hurt. They were cold, hard, honest, and clear-cut. There was a right answer and a wrong one, and though there wasn’t always an obvious solution, Jane never accepted that a solution didn’t exist.

Even impossible measurements of spacetime were simpler, to Jane, than people.

Chapter End Notes

Short but sweet :)

or maybe I should say short but heartbreaking? Hmmm
Chapter 153

Avengers Tower

April 2012

He breathed.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

Concentrated on his pulse. The exercises in self-control were practiced rhythms now, easy and familiar to slip into.

His breathing rate increased. His pulse picked up. Bruce could tell just by focusing about how fast it was going—now eighty beats per minute, ninety to one hundred, one twenty, one fifty…

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

He steadied himself.


He considered Loki, while he was in this calm, focused state. Loki’s reaction, when they confronted him, had confirmed something Bruce had suspected for some time. Loki seemed to understand better than most of the others what it was like to hate and fear and accept a part of himself, and his reveal—that he was not, in reality, of Asgard—proved that he understood because in some respect he felt the same.

Bruce, Jane, and Tony had quietly sought out the other members of the team and told them. In each case, they made it clear they trusted Loki’s judgment and didn’t want the others to go questioning him about it. Darcy had taken it with an unreadable expression, thanked Jane and Bruce, then gone back to her work. Clint, Steve, Natasha, Bucky, and Sam had all reacted pretty well, considering—Steve had been the most reluctant to just accept it, but the fact that Tony was going along with it had been enough for him, in the end. Maria, predictably, had handled the news the worst. It took an hour’s discussion and the combined efforts of Steve, Tony, and Clint to convince her not to go straight to Loki and demand that he tell them. Her grudge was understandable, but Bruce thought it made her unreasonable sometimes. Especially this time.

Bruce repeated his cycle five more times, each time coming closer to the two hundred beats per minute limit that usually triggered his transformation. When he was frightened or angry or in danger, he’d change at a much lower heart rate, and the easiest way to induce the transformation was just to think about the things that made him angry, but constantly practicing his self-control was necessary.
There were plenty of high-stress situations in which he didn’t want to change, and he had to be able to bring his pulse down.

Plus meditation helped him think—gave him a chance to sort through the things in his head and line them up in neat, orderly rows, instead of a tangled mess. Much easier to deal with that way.

Anxiety, dread, hope—all regarding the rapidly approaching vote on the Avengers Accords.

Determination—to control himself, to bring something to this team.

Contentment, general positive feelings—those came from his time in the lab, mostly. He’d never had… friends like this. Tony, Helen, and Jane in particular—they were brilliant, and ruthless in their pursuit of knowledge in each of their respective fields. They’d made some fascinating discoveries already in the last year and Bruce saw the promise of many more on the horizon. But he’d found solace among the rest of them too. A family of people who didn’t care about his demons.

And, of course, the ever-present rage.

General Ross was its primary target, but Bruce was growing increasingly frustrated with the rest of the world too. It seemed like every media outlet in the world was bashing on the Avengers without hesitation, calling them dangerous out-of-control vigilantes, monsters to be leashed. And then there was Thanos. Also Fury. Both of them self-righteous pricks, drunk on power and convinced their psychotic plans were for the better.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

Bruce steadied his heart rate—it had begun to rise just from thinking about them.

Everyone had turned him away at one point or another, except for the Avengers. His family. And that was another reason, beyond their acceptance, that he’d found such relief here in the Tower.

Every one of them had their demons, too. Every one of them was willing to push the limits, ignore the rules, disregard authority to do what was right. Every one of them had been mistreated and misjudged by the world in some way or other, and every one of them had a bone to pick.

If the Avengers Accords were passed, Bruce wasn’t going to quietly go along with it.

He knew he wouldn’t be the only one.
“We cannot agree to this,” Steve snapped.

“I don’t disagree,” Tony said. “But—Steve. This is the United Nations we’re talking about. They’re voting in a week.”

Steve looked around the table. “Darcy?”

“I tried.” She looked down at her hands, folded tightly on the table. “So did Prescott. France. Brazil. South Africa stayed neutral, and we had a surprise last-minute vote in our favor from Wakanda, but… they voted to approve the Avengers Accords as they stand for a full-body vote. And it’s not gonna go our way.” She took a deep breath. “I’m sorry.”

Loki, on the other side of her from Natasha, covered Darcy’s hand in his. The motion did not go unnoticed.

Natasha shifted, then tentatively reached out and rested her hand on Darcy’s shoulder. “You’re one person,” she said quietly. “Don’t blame this on yourself.” She looked around the table. Felt her jaw flex with anger that she kept hidden carefully away.

Tony leaned forward. “Blame this on Secretary Ross. Blame it on his puppet ambassador to the UN and all the goddamn pansies who are too fucking scared to accept that we can help them. Not you.”

“Oooh, watch your language, Goldilocks,” Clint mocked.

Darcy looked up, eyes flashing. There you are, Natasha thought. She’d hated seeing Darcy’s fire temporarily dimmed. “The press is freaking out. I was able to keep some of the worst of it quiet, but CNN, Fox, MSN, BBC, they’re all running news pieces on the “Avengers Menace” and “Oh no, the Scarlet Witch is going to eat our babies!” and “oh oh who are Ryan Dessen and Liam Hillworth we’re not saying they’re fake identities but they’re totally fake identities okay just don’t quote me on this we have no actual evidence”.” She tapped the table. “I honestly hate people so much right now.”

Even Sam looked furious, to Natasha’s eyes. Then again, he almost always followed Steve’s lead. Also, he was a reasonable guy. “What the fuck do they think we’re gonna do, take over the world?” he asked.

In the corner of her eye, Natasha saw Loki’s knee twitch just a fraction on Darcy’s other side.

“At this point, I’m fairly convinced we’d do a better job in charge than any of these imbeciles,” Clint muttered.

“It’s impractical,” Darcy said bluntly. “Political power was our best bet, but to be honest it was a losing battle from the beginning. Tide’s against us. We’ve just gotta ride it out.”
Natasha had bolt holes all over the world. She could keep them hidden if it came to that. But if the entire planet was looking for them, it’d be difficult to keep this many people fed and hidden and supplied well enough to do anything except hide. And half of them, including her, would probably lose it if they had to stay cooped up in a safe house while the world dissolved into this moronic infighting while Thanos came ever closer.

Tony put his head in his hands. It muffled his voice. “I just don’t see a way out of this.”

“We could fight the registration of enhanced humans,” Vision suggested. Natasha didn’t fully trust him yet (then again, she had only recently added Tony and Steve to that list), but she appreciated his calm and faultlessly logical presence. He could also be quite amusing as he tried to learn how to behave like a normal person. “There is adequate precedent—”

“Not with people so curious about us,” Pietro said, gesturing to himself and his sister. “They won’t agree.”

Natasha had argued against letting them join this war council, but Loki and Tony had convinced the others that the twins had to be included if the Avengers wanted to earn their trust. She had to admit, now, that they were at least providing useful insight.

Though they made things awkward, since Tony had yet to bring in a new and larger table to accommodate their growing group.

“He’s right, unfortunately,” Maria said. “Sam and I’ve been talking to our friends in the US government. Most of them are really wary of the prospect but some of the higher-ups in the White House are very gung-ho. We don’t have a lot of options.”

“I’m not going to take it lying down,” Bruce growled. “I won’t let them—let them microchip me like a pet —”

“Microchips?” Zima muttered, leaning closer.

“Small electromagnetic tags embedded beneath the skin that can be scanned and used for identification purposes,” Natasha clarified under her breath. The very idea made her want to kill somebody. “Usually used in dogs and cats so if they run away, a vet can scan it and find out the address and contact info of the owner.”

Zima scowled.

“So who here would be on that list?” Sam asked, looking around. “Per the standards of the registration bullshit.”

Clint rolled his eyes.

“Me,” Steve said grimly. “Natasha, Bruce, Pietro, Wanda, Vision, and they’ll definitely want to call Liam Hillworth in as well.”

“Which would just be an excuse to figure out who he really is,” Maria said.

“So we can’t let him go,” Steve’s face was set and determined.

Darcy bit her lip. “They’ll call Ryan Dessen in, too. For ‘testing’. Or some total bullshit along those lines. They can’t know he’s technically enhanced, but they definitely suspect.”

“I should clarify,” Loki said. “Should they attempt to ‘register’ me in any way, there will be deaths.”
“Heads are going roll if they try to microchip any of us,” Natasha said darkly. “Including you. I don’t care if it’s the President of the United States himself holding the damn thing. I’ll snap his neck if that’s what it takes to get out.”

No one said anything.

She didn’t regret saying it. Natasha wasn’t wired for regret. Also, it was true.

“I take it no one disagrees with that,” Darcy said at last.

More silence.

“Okay. In that case, I should probably find a way to keep that one off the table.” Her eyes gleamed. “Natasha, if I asked you to find blackmail material on a few people, how long would it take?”

Natasha felt her lips curve into a smirk. “How fast do you need it by?”

“Twenty-four hours.”

“Clint?” Natasha said, looking across the table.

He grinned back. “Thought you’d never ask.”

“I’ll text you a list of names,” Darcy said, whipping out her StarkPad. “This needs to be good enough to convince them to pressure their governments and UN ambassadors to flip and vote against the registration resolution. Thank God that thing’s separate from the Accords or we’d have no shot, but as is—Loki, what?”

“Those are high-level government officials, no?” he said.

“Got it in one.” Darcy typed as she talked.

“I could perhaps aid Natasha with falsification of evidence,” he said. “To frame them, should there be inadequate evidence.”

“I like that plan,” Natasha said, already considering how she’d factor that into her usual methods. “Zima, you’re coming?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” he said with a faint, cruel smile.

“Anyone else?” Clint looked around the table. His eyes caught on Maria.

She shrugged. “Might as well.”

“Is there any merit to having Wanda or Loki mess with their heads?” Steve asked.

Natasha buried her surprise that Steve had even brought that up. He’d been weird about it when Loki had altered the mind of the truck driver in Mexico, but now he was advocating an arguably bigger violation.

He must’ve caught the surprise from the rest of the group. “It’s practical,” he said flatly.

“No disagreement there,” Clint said.

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” Darcy said. “I mean, yeah, as a last resort, but evidence falsification’s probably better. Although—Wanda, if you had to, could you do the nightmare dredging thing?
Because that’d be a fantastic scare tactic.”

“Maybe,” Wanda said uncertainly.

Darcy made a note. “I’ll keep that in mind. But seriously—if we go screwing around people’s heads, Loki, do you have to be there or can you do it from a distance?”

“I can lay a compulsion on someone that lasts after I leave,” Loki said. “It is extremely difficult to lay one strong enough to make the target do as you wish yet leave enough of the original personality that none of their colleagues notices. It would be easier were I there at all times, and hidden, but still extremely complicated.”

“So probably not,” Darcy said. “Especially now that they know we’ve got someone who has at least limited mind powers—before Wanda and Vision, the thought wouldn’t have even come up for them, but now, if some high-up starts acting weird and then reverses their position—people are going to scream MIND CONTROL!! faster than you can blink. Since they know it exists.”

“But blackmail won’t?” Steve said.

Natasha met Darcy’s eyes. “Blackmail leaves the autonomy of the target in place. They retain their personality, and they choose to do what we say.”

Loki sat back in his chair, a faint, admiring smile on his face.

“You guys are vaguely terrifying,” Sam said. “You know that, right?”

“Aww, thanks, bird man!” Darcy said, laughing.

Natasha’s phone buzzed. She pulled it out and scanned the list, eyebrows rising. “This will take some work.”

“So can you do it?”

Natasha looked up at Darcy. “Hi, I’m the Black Widow, have we met?”

Darcy laughed. “Fair point.”

“So we can stall the registration one,” Bruce verified.

“I think I can get it to die, not just stall,” Darcy said with grim pleasure. “Accords won’t go anywhere, though. No matter how many people we blackmail. It’s got way too much momentum.”

“So Nat, Bucky, Clint, Maria, and Loki are on the blackmail squad,” Tony said. “Sounds like fun. How about the rest of us?”

Darcy cocked her head. “How do you feel about a TV interview? You, me, Steve.”

“As if he’d pass up a chance to get his face on the big screen,” Sam said.

Tony half-smiled. “You’re not wrong, Steve?”

“What about?” Steve said.

“It’s a chance to discuss the enhanced registry. Also the Accords, but mostly the registry.” Darcy shrugged. “They just want to ask some questions, get our official stance on it. Which has technically already been released, but it’s good PR and good ratings for the show if we get up there and actually
“But more time with the Avengers on their television channel means more viewers and therefore more revenue, correct?” Loki said.

“Give the man a medal.” Darcy looked back at Steve. “What do you say?”

“Can’t hurt,” Steve said. “And we have pull with the people. If they see us up there—yeah, I’ll do it.”

“Good,” Darcy said. “Because the Accords and the registry get voted on in eight days. Plus I already scheduled the TV appointment. Go fix your hair, we’re leaving in two hours.”

Loki coughed out a laugh.

Darcy smirked sideways at him.

“What about that girl from Nigeria?” Tony asked. “Zina, right?”

“We got her into a refugee foster home in France,” Sam said. “She said she’d prefer that; she and her brothers are from Morocco originally and her French is better than her English. Plus there’s a fair number of Moroccan immigrants in France. The United Nations will protect her and eventually she can come to us or them if she wants help with her powers.”

“Which are what exactly?” Darcy said.

“Metallokinesis,” Tony said, just as Clint replied, “She moves metal with her head.”

Both men paused and mock glared at each other.

“Anyway,” Steve said. “She’s safe? Taken care of?”

Natasha frowned. “I’m not sure I’m comfortable leaving her under UN jurisdiction.”

“She’s a kid,” Tony said. “They’re not bad people, just idiots. And we’ve got her email address, and the phone number for the foster home. Clint’s been calling every other day just to…”

“Check in,” Clint finished. “See how she’s doing.”

“I like her,” Maria said.

“Good,” Steve said, looking relieved. “Now, is there anything else, or—”

“I have something that could help in the final battle,” Jane said.

They all paused and looked at her. Even Natasha temporarily filed away her plans for blackmail—which would be much more fun now that she could simply make up crimes and have Loki spin evidence for them out of nowhere—to pay attention.

Jane almost never joined in what Tony and Sam had begun calling their war councils. And today, sitting between Tony and Sam instead of with Helen like usual. In fact… now that Natasha was thinking about it, Helen and Jane hadn’t made eye contact once this entire meeting.

Jane took a deep breath and put a black box on the table.

Wanda, Pietro, and Tony immediately sat up straighter. Loki was near impossible to read, as per
usual, but Natasha’s intuition said he’d just gone on high alert, though she couldn’t have said why.

“That is the device which temporarily cancelled my workings,” Loki said. “Jane—”

“I know you don’t like that this thing even exists,” Jane said in a rush. “Tony and I’ve been just—just tinkering around—I was learning a lot about your power, and when we were talking, Tony was thinking of how to nullify it. This thing’s pretty weak right now, but it emits a form of energy that’s—like seidr, but also its opposite.”

Loki considered the box. A second later, he murmured a few soft words, and the disguise of Liam Hillworth slid into place with a greenish shimmer. “Try it again,” he ordered.

Jane didn’t hesitate. She picked up the box, aimed it at Loki, and pressed a button on the side.

The three prongs on the end snapped out a beam of cold energy that hit Loki squarely in the chest.

His illusion held.

Jane frowned. “It worked before—”

“You mean, when you terrified me by suddenly revealing a mass-murdering member of alien royalty pretending to be some random stranger in my lab?” Helen said drily, still not looking at Jane directly.

“Yeah,” Jane said absently, turning the box over in her hands. She seemed to be deliberately not glancing at Helen. “That… it looks fine…”

Loki looked pleased with himself. “It seems I have successfully discovered a counterspell.”

“Damn,” Jane sighed. “Guess I—never mind, guys.”

“No,” Loki said. “You wish to use something like that, except of a higher energy level, on Thanos, correct?”

“Yeah,” she said. “But if you can stop it—”

Loki hesitated. “It would get progressively more difficult to do so as the strength of the beam increased,” he said at last. “And I was only able to stop it because I’ve spent the last several days working on creating a runic ward that protects me from it. Thanos will be aware of neither the device nor the countersigil.”

Natasha bit back shock.

“So you think it has a chance,” Tony said.

Loki shrugged. “It’s remarkably clever. I doubt you can relieve Thanos of his seidr entirely, but he’ll almost certainly be warded heavily against conventional weapons. The device could strip or weaken those wards, or his preexisting spells, enough to allow us a clear shot.”

Natasha was slightly surprised that Loki had even admitted this. He hated Thanos, but she hadn’t realized his hate was so strong (or that he trusted them enough) that he was willing to admit such a weakness in himself. Even if it was only implied.

“You made that?” Steve asked, looking at Tony.

Tony shrugged. “Jane figured out what it had to do, and I figured out how to build a device that would do it.”
Uncharacteristically humble.

Natasha remembered the Tony Stark she’d first met years ago in Monaco. Arrogant, selfish, entitled, shallow. He’d spent so long pressured by his father, ostracized by his peers, struggling to find a place in the world that was outside his father’s shadow and that didn’t frustrate and stifle his genius, that he’d become a not-particularly-likeable person. In fact, she’d rather wanted to punch him on many occasions.

He’d changed for the better, she believed.

“Mkay, my spy fairies, get going,” Darcy said.

“Jane, Tony, can I talk to you about the actual capabilities of that device in more detail?” Steve asked.

“Sure.” Tony tossed the device up and caught it again. “We can use the other conference room. Jane?”

“What? Oh—coming.” Jane looked up from her StarkPad and joined them.

Natasha saw Bruce and Helen confer briefly, then beckon the twins and Vision with them, also heading for the elevator. Probably a lab trip—the resident scientists had grown quite fascinated with the twins’ power and with understanding what exactly Vision’s abilities. She hadn’t had a chance to spar with him yet, but she’d heard from Loki that it was an intriguing experience, since he was learning how to make specific parts of his body intangible.

But that was for another time.

She leaned forward, sending the list of names on to Maria, Clint, and Zima. Darcy shoved her StarkPad aside and shifted forward as well.

“Okay,” Darcy said. “Here’s what I need to have happen.”

Chapter End Notes

Updates have been spotty lately because I wrote myself into a corner a bit and had to do a lot more editing than I usually do. I also went back and added 6 chapters because I got so excited about the plot moving forward that characterization got left in the dust a bit. Some commenters were like “I hope you address X” / ”ooh I wonder how [character] is going to respond to [situation]” and I'm really grateful to anyone who said anything like that because chances are you reminded me to put in certain things that I would've forgotten. This fic will work a lot better and hopefully I've worked out enough kinks that I can get back to more or less daily updates. Thanks for your patience!
“Hey, America! Welcome back to Creighton Weeknights!” the host boomed, his warm, full voice rolling through the room. “Tonight, I’m pleased to announce we have some very special guests—I’d like to welcome Captain America, Tony Stark, and the public relations head for Stark Industries and the Avengers, Darcy Lewis!”

Darcy fixed a pleasant, warm smile on her face and walked onto the studio. She’d deliberately positioned herself to walk on behind Steve and Tony, knowing that if she came on last, people would be so focused on their idols that they wouldn’t even notice her, really. Which was how she liked it.

“How’ve you been, Tony?” Creighton said with a warm grin. “I gotta say, this show’s seemed tame after that party you threw last time!”

Tony smirked. “We all do our parts.”

“Barry!” Tony said, shaking the host’s hand with his charismatic public face smile. Darcy knew they’d met several times before; Creighton’s weeknight special on CNN had been running for years and was a highly popular segment. “We meet again!”

“How’s it going, Captain?” Creighton moved on to Steve with a distinct air of oh my god my idol. “Such an honor—I used to read the comics about you as a kid, you know that? And collect the cards.”

Steve’s face darkened just a shade. Probably not noticeable to anyone else, but Darcy knew he’d be thinking of Coulson, and therefore Thor.

But he covered it up well. Impressively, for him. Steve had come a long way in terms of putting on a mask. “Probably wouldn’t have made so many of those if they knew I’d come back,” he said with a slight smile, one hundred percent the honorable, good, stoic soldier.

“Nice job, Darcy thought approvingly.

“And Miss Lewis!” Creighton said, coming at last to her.

“Call me Darcy, please,” she said, grinning back and holding out her hand to shake.

His grip was firm. Slightly clammy. She already didn’t like the guy. Too sleazy. “Then you must call me Barry,” he said.

“It’s a deal. Pleasure to meet you,” she said.

“Likewise. Take a seat, take a seat!”

They found spots around the strategically placed couches and armchairs—enough to have plenty of space for all of them, but not so many that they left awkward negative space. Creighton sprawled in an obviously predetermined manner on his trademark leather chair. “How are you all doing this fine evening?”

“Quite well, thanks,” Steve said.
“I’m doing fantastic now that I’m on TV,” Tony said, winking at the camera. Darcy imagined middle-aged women swooning across the country and suppressed a laugh.

“You’re old hat with this,” Creighton said. “How about you, Captain? Modern technology treating you well?”

“It’s a bit strange thinking I’m live in people’s living rooms at the moment,” Steve admitted. “Back in the forties, it was all recorded. Or in person.”

“But you cast aside the showmanship, didn’t you? Made a real difference!” Creighton said.

“Don’t underestimate showmanship,” Tony said with a roguish grin. *Good thing Tony warned Steve about the façade he’d have to wear.* “Cappy might be too pure for it, but some of us know how to milk it.”

“There’s a reason TV add slots get so expensive,” Darcy said drily.

Tony pointed at her dramatically.

“In that case—Darcy, what do you think’s more important? The camera or the action?” Creighton asked with an oozy smile.

*I would so love to give you a flat tire. Or just shove your car off a cliff.* “They’re both equally valid,” she said. “They serve different purposes.” A vague not-answer that would quickly get his attention off her.

Darcy kept her smile fixed as Creighton turned to his more interesting *(ha)* guests. “I suppose this ties in pretty well to the real subject of our conversation tonight. I think a lot of people have been pretty curious lately about the Avengers Accords, plus the bill that would require registration of “enhanced individuals”. Now, as I understand it, the Captain here would be considered “enhanced” while Tony and Darcy would be exempt. Is that correct?”

“Yup,” Tony said.

“Captain, how do you feel about this idea?” Creighton said.

*Come on, Steve. Play nice.* Darcy knew they had to stay reasonable. Steve’s anger was totally justified, as far as she was concerned, but he had to keep it under wraps to some degree.

“I find it abhorrent,” Steve said flatly. But calmly. *Yeah, that’s the way.*

“That’s a strong statement. Would you care to elaborate?” Creighton coughed and looked off to the side, at the teleprompter to the left of the camera. Darcy’d been on TV a few times before for interviews and knew better than to look around at the people in the studio; she’d gotten scolded for it once. You were supposed to look like no one else existed except the other people on camera. “That’s a strong statement. Would you care to elaborate?”

“Sure,” Steve said. He was staying perfectly steady, but the set of his jaw and the tension in his shoulders made it clear that he had strong feelings on the subject. Darcy was feeling great about how he was handling this. “It’s dehumanizing, for one thing, and a severe invasion of privacy, for another. It’s basically handing the government a way to track me and file away all my personal information, and it gives them rights to invade my life.”

“Privacy rights aren’t in the Constitution,” Creighton countered, making Darcy want to slap him even though it was a prepared devil’s advocate question listed on the teleprompter.
“They’re protected by legal precedent,” Steve snapped.

Creighton tapped the table. “Wouldn’t you agree, though, that enhanced persons have more potential to do harm?”

“What about people with genius level IQs?” Tony said. “For example, hey! Me.”

“I don’t see the correlation,” Creighton said with a grin.

Darcy decided it was time to jump in. “I think it’s pretty clear,” she said without shifting position. “Tony has a lot more, as you put it, ‘potential to do harm’ than the average American. Or average citizen of anywhere. Should we register everyone with a genius IQ to make sure they don’t turn their brilliance to causing damage? For that matter, what about people who’re like really gifted in athletics, and would be better at robberies and thefts and break-ins and assaults? What about people with special skills that they’ve spent their lives developing that could be turned to bad things? Clint Barton, for example, and his skill as a special forces soldier—he’s completely normal. Computer programmers. I could keep going.”

“That’s not the point,” Creighton said. He was getting ever-so-slightly flustered. Darcy doubted anyone other than Loki and maybe Natasha would’ve caught it, but she cocked her head, ready to exploit his weakness. “The point is that these people have inhuman abilities.”

“Again, dehumanization,” Steve interjected.

Creighton raised a hand. “I’m just laying out the counterargument here. These abilities let people disobey the law too easily.”

“So does being a genius!” Darcy said. “Or, for that matter, rich! This sets a dangerous precedent for profiling people and watching or punishing them before they’ve ever committed a crime.”

“Sometimes there’s merit to that,” Creighton argued. “Terrorist watch lists, for example—”

Darcy knew full well that he hadn’t meant to say that people with superpowers were like terrorists. She also firmly believed terrorist watch lists were in most cases useful for tracking actual terrorists. She just didn’t give a shit. It was time to wreck him.

She sat up straight, eyes wide, feigning shock. “Did you just—did you just compare enhanced persons to terrorists?”

Creighton flinched just a little bit. Darcy bit back a smirk. “No, I—of course not—I just meant to say that there can be uses to profiling people against possible future criminal activities—”

“So like terrorism watch,” Steve said.

Tony rolled his eyes. He’d caught on. Darcy knew they’d have a laugh over this later. “Barry, seriously, that one’s a stretch. You think Captain America needs to be on a goddamn watch list? Hey, maybe we should put President Caldwell on there! Put a microchip in Secretary Ross, see how he likes it!”

Creighton’s face was bright red. “I—of course I don’t think Captain Rogers is the equivalent of a terrorist, not at all—”

“But he’d be forced to give up personal information and be registered and tagged on a list of people you equated to terrorist watch,” Darcy retorted. It was getting increasingly difficult to hide the wicked triumphant grin that threatened to spread over her face.
“That’s not what I meant,” Creighton said, but he’d already been wrecked, and they all knew it.

A recorded voice boomed, And now it’s time for our surprise guest!

Darcy sat up a little straighter. Surprise guest… That couldn’t be good. No one had told her about this, and judging by the looks on Steve and Tony’s faces, they were in the same boat.

But Creighton looked relieved and not surprised in the least.

Definitely a bad sign.

A short dark-haired woman walked onto the set. Her face was grim. The hand tucked against her purse, the hand held away from the camera, was shaking just a little bit. And her eyes were locked on Tony.

Darcy had the unmistakable feeling that things were spiraling out of her control.

“Ms. Spencer!” Creighton said, an unmistakably relieved smile transforming his face. Darcy kept her own expression pleasant but inside she was thinking what the actual shit is happening?

“Thank you for giving me this opportunity,” Ms. Spencer said, every word stilted. She’d clearly been overprepped, Darcy thought with disdain. That or she was nervous about being on TV. Or both.

“Of course, of course.”

Darcy reached down. One of the first spells Loki had taught her was a set of runes that would allow her to communicate with him in silence. She’d practiced obsessively until she could cast the spell by only tracing the runes on a surface; it exhausted her, but once the connection was made he’d take over and the load would lighten. All she had to do was get his attention. She carefully drew the runes’ shapes on the seat between her leg and its arm, hidden from the camera and Creighton.

Darcy. Loki’s voice echoed in her head. She sighed slowly as the mental drain of the spell went away. What’s going on with this woman?

He was disguised in the studio, as a potential last-minute bodyguard. Darcy had also pushed to have him there because he was brilliant and she liked talking to him about his impressions of people. Not that she’d tell the other Avengers that. They were weird enough about her friendship with Loki already, and they didn’t even know it had gone beyond friendship. No fucking clue. How’s she on here?

Give me a moment.

“—been looking for an opportunity to speak with Mr. Stark,” Creighton was explaining to the audience. “Lots of people have, of course, but in this case, we decided—”

Ross bribed the studio. Loki’s mental voice was full of disgust. No one here is of a hierarchal level to know what, precisely, she plans to say—but it’s not good. Tread carefully.

You, too, she thought back, and cut the connection. Focused back in.

The studio was silent.

“This is your son?” Tony asked, picking up a picture off the table.

The pieces slotted together in Darcy’s head. Pissed woman. Photograph. Son. Ross. Fucking hell. If this lady was about to deliver some bullshit about the Avengers’ collateral damage—
It was worse.

“His name was Charlie Spencer,” she said, voice shaking. “He was in Sokovia. And you murdered him.”

“Our fight was with Hydra,” Tony managed. Darcy saw his wide eyes. Saw the pale cast to his skin, the sweat beading already on his neck, and knew this was about to go south. “Not the civilians—”

“That’s what you say,” Ms. Spencer hissed. “It was you, Mr. Stark. One of your missiles went astray and blew up an apartment building. My son was there. He was doing humanitarian outreach. And you killed him.” She shook her head. Tony didn’t seem able to look away. “Not that it matters to you. Or Wanda Maximoff, blowing up an office complex in Lagos. Bruce Banner’s alter ego, wrecking New York. Rogers and Wilson and Dessen, dropping a building on Washington, D.C. Natasha Romanoff—an assassin. You say you fight for us? You only fight for yourself.” She spat on him.

Steve jumped to his feet, stepping between them. “Uncalled for,” he snapped, even now careful to stay back, to not loom over the woman, who he dwarfed. His posture was defensive, but not threatening. Thank God. Darcy couldn’t even imagine the PR nightmare that would come with Captain America Physically Threatens Elderly Mother on Live TV!

“You’re just as bad as the rest,” Ms. Spencer said contemptuously, sweeping up the picture from the table. “A fraud in the colors of this country. Who’s going to avenge my son, Rogers?”

She slapped the photograph onto his chest.

Steve ignored it. Let it flutter to the floor when she took her hand away.

Tony stood up without a word and walked off camera.

“Steve,” Darcy said, low.

He nodded once and followed.

Someone needed to get Tony home. Keep him from self-destructing. They all remembered too well what happened after Pepper died. Drinking, drugs, clubs, who even knew what else.

“I—wait, where are they going?” Creighton spluttered.

Ms. Spencer fixed her damning gaze on Darcy.

But Darcy didn’t accept damnation from anyone who wasn’t herself.

“I would imagine that Captain Rogers has gone to minimize the damage that comes from psychologically threatening a PTSD victim in front of half the country,” she said viciously. Damage control. Damage control. She felt what she’d come to recognize as her seidr—she could feel it now that she’d cast a few spells, which was wicked cool but no, Darce, you don’t have time to freak out again over the fact that you’re a witch—pulsing as Loki tried to contact her, but ignored it. She needed all her wits about her to clean up this mess.

Ms. Spencer flinched. Creighton actually stepped back. His face turned pasty white, probably imagining the fallout that would probably involve people accusing him of intolerance, abuse of a mental illness victim—

He’d be the public face of news outlet’s failure.
Bribery. Fucking hell. Darcy couldn’t wait to dump that one on the Internet.

She decided to throw the rules of talk shows out the window. Turned and stared right into the camera. The studio people were apparently too stunned to consider turning it off. “There’s been collateral damage when the Avengers have fought Hydra, yeah. But someone tell me: what would the damage be if we weren’t here? If we hadn’t taken out Hydra?”

“Captain Rogers, who chose his enhancement, did it to stop the Nazis. If you think that’s dumb, I don’t even know what to say to you. The Maximoff twins? Coerced and brainwashed by the mind scepter. By Hydra. Tony Stark suffers from PTSD in part because of the battles he’s fought in against Hydra. Captain America, the Falcon, Ryan Dessen, Natasha Romanoff—they brought down the Triskelion to prevent Hydra from killing hundreds of millions of innocent people in cold blood.”

Dead silence.

“And for that matter—this registration bill?” Time to go for the kill. “It’s akin to racism, ableism, anti-Semitism. It’s a way to register people based on an aspect of themselves that’s in many cases unwanted and outside their control. It’s judging people on what you’re afraid they’ll do, not on their actual actions. It’ll encourage discrimination, fear, separatism, and social division. It’s a blatant violation of human rights, and we cannot and will not support it.” She turned to Creighton and Ms. Spencer with the most genuinely sweet smile she could muster. “You can quote me on that.”

Her hands were still shaking when she climbed into the limousine.

Evidently Steve had called a cab to take himself and Tony home. Darcy was alone with Loki in the back, staring down at her fists.

A glass half full of red wine entered her field of vision.

Darcy glanced up. Loki was offering it, face expressionless.

“Thanks,” she said, and knocked it back without hesitation.

He refilled the glass in silence.

Darcy sipped slower this time.

The limo pulled slowly out into traffic.

“Fuck,” she breathed, letting her head tip back onto his shoulder as the full force of what had just happened hit her like a semi truck. Loki hesitated, then wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“If it comes as any comfort,” Loki said quietly, “I am impressed.”

She snorted without opening her eyes. A quiet feeling of déjà vu was hitting her. “Yeah. Right. That spiraled totally out of control.”

She snorted without opening her eyes. A quiet feeling of déjà vu was hitting her. “Yeah. Right. That spiraled totally out of control.”

“But you handled it admirably,” Loki said. “You are… a force of nature, Darcy Lewis.”

And I really want to kiss you.

Then she realized she could.

She sat up and turned, straddling Loki’s lap.
His hands automatically braced around her hips and she saw his eyes darken, but he held back.
“Darcy, perhaps now is not the best time—”

“Shut up,” she said, and kissed him.

He gave up completely and returned the kiss with just as much passion.

Darcy realized she didn’t want chaste. She didn’t want slow. They’d done slow the first few times, learning each other’s rhythms, but right now she really just wanted to fuck him until she couldn’t think about anything else.

His hands were inside her shirt.

She shifted her hips, felt exactly how much he wanted her, and smirked against his lips.

Loki kissed his way down her neck, across her collarbone, and Darcy tipped her head back, tugging at his shirt. She could feel the now-familiar call of his magic to hers, both their seidr humming along with their bodies. Hers was a teacup to his ocean, but it didn’t matter.

He paused and pulled back, and with a gesture his shirt and hers were both gone who-knew-where.

“Really?” he said, voice rough. Why are you so sexy? “In the back of a limousine?”

“Mmm, maybe not,” she agreed. “Driver could see us anytime.”

Loki grinned. Lunged forward.

She opened her mouth to shout something, she didn’t know what, but then there was a dizzying blur of darkness and she found herself toppling back onto Loki’s bed.

He shifted above her, pressing her down into the mattress.

“You’re pretty useful to have around,” she said, and then they were kissing and her hands were roaming his perfect body and she forgot everything except his name.

Loki

He propped himself up on one elbow and watched her sleep at his side.

She was tiny compared to him. Not a fighter, and while she was far from unfit, she felt light as a feather. Fragile. She was anything but.

He remembered the awe he’d felt in the studio, watching her eviscerate that sack of ooze. Loki suspected Creighton’s career was over, but if not, it would be soon, between himself and Darcy. Even as she’d stepped up and destroyed the studio’s argument, even as Ms. Spencer came on and Tony stormed off and Darcy took over the situation, even as Loki cast a spell to blur the technological crew’s minds so they would not disable the broadcasting equipment, he’d watched and listened and felt his admiration for her grow with every fierce, perfectly chosen word that came out of her mouth.

Loki had never, in more than a thousand years of life, felt anything like this. Not for any of the dozens (if not hundreds) of lovers he’d taken. Not for any of the women his—Odin—had tried to foist on him.
He’d learned long ago to never allow anyone to grow close. People left. That was the way of the realms. They left his life and weakened him with every rejection, every refusal.

But as Loki lay beside her in his bed, he admitted to himself that he wouldn’t be able to carve her out of his affections no matter the weapon he used.

And he knew—he knew—that when she left him, too, it would wreck him. And he would do nothing to stop it.

But he could never tell her the truth.
Chapter 156

Avengers Tower

April 2012

“Faster.”

Jane pushed herself, breathing hard.

“There you go. Remember to put your hips into it.”

She concentrated on moving her hips with each punch. The fifty-pound bag jumped only a little every time her gloved hands hit it.

“And… done.”

She stopped, panting.

“Nice job,” Sam said with a grin. “You’ve come a long way.”

“Thanks,” she said, trying to smile back. She was so tired it was hard to do. She’d asked him a month ago to start teaching her basic self-defense in Tony’s gym floor, and Sam was a good teacher, but Jane wasn’t the fastest learner. She’d always been slow to learn anything physical, and she tripped a lot, and she apparently couldn’t aim punches very well. But she’d get there.

Sam glanced over at the corner, where Natasha was doing what looked like high-speed death yoga while Bucky wrapped his hands. Helen was on the treadmill in the corner and Steve and Clint were sparring in the boxing/wrestling ring.

“Darcy couldn’t make it?” Maria asked, coming over to them.

Jane shook her head and pulled off her gloves. “She’s busy.”


With Loki, Jane thought, still not sure how she felt about their odd relationship but glad Darcy had seemed happy when she told Jane about it. She didn’t think it could be called a romance. That implied ice cream dates and sweetness to Jane, two things she didn’t associate with Darcy and definitely didn’t associate with Loki.

“Good for her,” Maria said.

“You got some good blackmail stuff?” Sam said.

Maria smiled slightly, the equivalent of a full beaming grin on most people. “Yes. You wouldn’t believe the things ambassadors get up to on foreign trips. Not to mention Secretaries of State, high-level intelligence officials… they’ve all got skeletons. And those that didn’t—Loki made some up.” She shook her head. “He’s… frankly a bit frightening.”

“Glad he’s on our side,” Sam muttered. “Is he helping Darcy right now?”

“Yes. Natasha and I were also, earlier, but she had us leave—we’d been with her for hours. Loki’s
made a new disguise as her assistant; he’s with her in D.C.”

Jane needed to talk to Darcy, still, about Helen. Because she hadn’t said a word to Jane in days beyond what was strictly necessary for their joint projects.

She looked over at Helen, running on one of the treadmills.

They’d taken to running together a few times a week over the last few months but since Jane’s epic failure to ask her on a date, Helen had been using the treadmills almost every day.

The treadmill beeped. Jane snapped out of her thoughts as Helen slowed down, briefly ran through her stats on the screen, and hopped off, breathing hard.

She looked away. Tried to focus on Natasha’s death yoga.

“Did you work out that question about the atmosphere?”

Jane jumped and whipped around.

Helen stood there. If Jane hadn’t known better, she’d have thought Helen actually looked uncomfortable.

“What… atmosphere question?” she said slowly. She’d been ready to pretend she’d never asked Helen for anything other than friendship if Helen said no—and her behavior the last few days seemed like a pretty clear not interested. So Jane would act normal. Even if every word hurt.

“The one about Loki, when he teleports? Air displacement.”

“Oh. Right. Uh—he actually swaps places with the air molecules wherever he’s teleporting to,” Jane said, remembering that they’d talked about this a week or two ago. “It’s fascinating. There’s no vacuum space, not even for a fraction of a second. The transfer is instantaneous. Air molecules in the exact volume of his body and clothes reappear where he was originally standing, and he then occupies the space they were in the new location.” She’d spent hours testing this effect the previous week.

Helen shook her head. “Who knew…”

Jane took a breath. They hadn’t really talked about this, but she’d spent enough time with Darcy to know it was something she should at least bring up. And Helen deserved her consideration. “I… are you… comfortable with him here?”

Helen raised an eyebrow. “You have changed. Once upon a time, you wouldn’t even have thought to ask that.”

“Darcy’s… really good with people,” Jane said, looking down. “I copy her.”

“I’m impressed,” Helen said in the sharp, flat way she had. Compliments and criticism sounded the same in Helen’s voice—simple statements of fact. “To answer your question—I wasn’t at first. But I must admit, his company is entertaining.”

“He’s brilliant,” Jane said.

“Oh, absolutely.” Helen nodded.

“Shall we… head back to the lab?” Jane said.
“Sure.” Helen fell into step with her; Jane waved goodbye to Sam, now in conversation with Maria, Clint, and Steve.

“I’m sorry I lied,” Jane blurted once they were in the hallway.

Helen shrugged. “I know why you did. I’m not hurt.”

_I suspect most people would be._ Jane knew lying wasn’t generally acceptable in a friendship.

“We should talk,” Helen said abruptly.

“We are talking.”

Helen shot her a _look_. “You know precisely what I want to talk about, Jane.”

Jane looked at her shoes. “I meant what I said. You’re not interested, so it never happened. We’re colleagues. Friends, if… if you want.”

Helen made a frustrated noise. “No, I need to say—”

“Doctors Foster and Cho,” Friday said over the intercom.

They both paused.

“Tony is requesting your presence in the penthouse.”

“Of _course_ he is,” Helen muttered. “You can go. I’m going to change—I’ve got spare clothes in my bag in here.”

Jane nodded and jogged back down the hall toward the stairs, wanting to test her newfound punching skills on Tony for his incredibly bad timing.
Steve scanned the various documents shown on Tony’s table. Videos, scanned papers, transcripts of phone calls, pictures, police reports, eyewitness interviews.

It was concerning, to say the least.

“So…”

“I think it’s worth checking out,” Tony said. “Small teams, low profile. There’s three general locations. I’ve been running satellite surveillance for a week and I’ve narrowed it down to about a ten-mile radius in each place.”

“You called us all up here for this?” Natasha said. “Conspiracy theories and blurry photos? What do you think we’ll find, Bigfoot?”

Tony glared at her. “I think it’s worth looking at,” he said. “Because of this.”

He tapped one of the smaller pictures in the corner of the table. It grew and became clearer.

Steve recoiled.

The thing in the picture wasn’t a typical cartoonish alien. It wasn’t even vaguely humanoid, and seemed to have no skeleton.

“Loki, tell them what you told me,” Tony said.

“Please,” Clint added.

“They call themselves…” Loki made a strange series of clicking sounds. “In the language of the Aesir, and most other races with an Aesir-like voice box, they are called the Daavit. Their bodies are cartilaginous and grow into a wild variety of forms. Research suggests they have some limited control over how their bodies grow, and can, with time, grow limbs at will. Their culture is based around hierarchal battles. Several… culture scientists?... have noted that the victor in a fight between two Daavi often grafts the limbs, armor, scales, or in some cases skin of the dead onto its own body. They reproduce asexually by laying massive pods of eggs in large, lumbering mammal-like beasts on their home world. When the eggs hatch, they devour the host from the inside out until it dies.”

Dead silence.

“That’s, uh. Creepy as fuck,” Sam said. “So they basically kill other people of their own species and then take bits of the loser’s body as a trophy?”

“Yes,” Loki said. “And they never stop growing. The one Daavit I have ever encountered was taller than myself, with a disconcerting amalgamation of tentacles, claws, limbs, and even several rudimentary sets of wings. All, or mostly, trophies.”

“You’re telling me we have space parasites showing up on Earth at three separate places,” Bruce said. “Who, I’m guessing, could lay eggs in humans.”
Even Natasha looked faintly repulsed. “I take it back. This is a problem.”

“They are fascinating,” Vision mused, leaning forward to study the image more closely. Steve wasn’t sure he liked that he/it was so interested. “Who took this photograph?”

“A hiker,” Tony said. “Who disappeared. It was uploaded to his iCloud automatically. I hacked it when I found out he’d disappeared in my search radius. No one else has seen this.”

“It’s illegally obtained?” Pietro said. “I take it that means we can’t send this to the UN.”

“No,” Maria said. “They’d come down on Tony like holy fire if they heard about him hacking private citizens’ accounts. Even if it’s a deceased citizen.”

“They’re pretty much looking to crucify us at this point,” Darcy said. “We can’t give them a reason. Even one as small as this. It’s partly a press battle—can you imagine? Billionaire CEO of Stark Industries Hacking Citizens’ Personal Information at Will.”

“This other evidence is too circumstantial for us to convince them to let us go,” Steve said, looking over the shaky videos, the conspiracy pages. “They’ll think we’re chasing ghosts.”

“This is why we can’t sign those Accords,” Tony muttered. “They’ll tie our hands to cinder blocks and drop us in a lake. We’d be impotent.”

Steve glanced at him. He hadn’t had a chance to talk to Tony about what happened at the studio—whenever he tried, Tony shut him down and changed the subject. But it seemed to have lit a new fire in Tony’s eyes. Darcy had told them what Loki discovered about bribery and traced it back to the White House using questionable methods. She thought it had been meant to break Tony’s resistance to the Accords. Instead, Ms. Spencer’s visit seemed to have done the opposite.

For Steve’s part, her story was exactly why he believed the Avengers were necessary.

Her son died because of Hydra, not Tony or Steve or anyone else in this tower. He’d do what was necessary to keep that from happening to anyone else. Even if it meant going toe-to-toe with the United Nations, the President, or Asgard itself.

Not that, from Loki’s descriptions, Odin really gave a shit what happened on Earth, as long as it stayed on Earth.

“They want to get rid of us quietly,” Loki said.

Steve wondered at his use of us.

“Well, that vote is in forty-eight hours,” Clint said. “So how about we go prove to them why we need to be independent?”

“If you can bring back one of those bodies…” Darcy said. “It’d be a wake-up call for the rest of the world. In fact—” Her smile grew devilish. “How about we send the circumstantial, inconclusive evidence to the UN and ask what they think? They’ll forbid us action, we’ll go anyway, bring back a body, and we can use it as the exact reason we can’t sign the accords.”

Loki was sitting up straighter, eyes flicking over the collected documents on the table. “This could make them vote against the Accords completely,” he breathed. “Not just the registration idea—all of it.” He looked at Darcy. “Brilliant.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said with a return grin. “So—we’ve got real dirt on almost all the people we
need to pressure anyway over the registration thing, and fake dirt on what, like a dozen you couldn’t dig shit up about?”

“Thirteen,” Natasha said.

“Right, yeah, baker’s dozen, same difference. With this, I think… I think I can put it all away.”

Natasha was nodding along, eyes glittering. “It’s very clever.”

“Bruce,” Tony said. “You and I can work on how to catch one—”

Steve pulled up the map. He’d just noticed—

“Look at this,” he said. “North of Quebec, down in the southern part of Mexico, up in Alaska.” He tapped the regions where Tony had isolated the strange sightings and worrisome stories. Three pulsing red circles showed on the map. “What does this look like to you?”

With North America blown up to size, it was obvious.

Natasha, Bucky, Loki, and Clint got it immediately. “Shit,” Clint said, eyes wide.

“Oh,” Maria said.

Tony swore too.

“This isn’t just some isolated thing—not random aliens drawn to Earth after Loki came here,” Steve said, barely glancing at Loki. “They’re not looking for hosts. This is an invasion.”

Wanda looked at Loki and spoke up for the first time. “Do you think—”

“Thanos?” Loki said. “It is likely. I suspected he would be bringing his army through in pieces over time with the aid of beings capable of worldwalking. Either they have slipped their leashes, or—as is more plausible—he has begun his invasion earlier than I expected.”

“We should get going, then,” Pietro said.

“Clint, Maria, Sam—I have new gear for all of you,” Tony said. “It’s in your spots in the armory. Resistant to electricity, bulletproof, lightweight, and armored. Zippy—”

“Really?” Pietro protested.

“—I hashed something out for you too—come down to the lab with me after we’re done here. I hope you like blue. And, Steve—what you requested? It’s done.”

Darcy, Sam, and Bucky shot Steve questioning glances, but he ignored them. “Thanks.”

“Who’s going where?” Clint said. “Three locations, three teams.”

“Loki, Clint, Pietro, Bruce—take Alaska,” Steve said. Loki’s excess of power would counteract both Pietro’s inexperience and the one-person deficit, since Bruce would stay in the jet as a last resort as usual. “Wanda, Tony, Vision, Maria—you can head south. I’ll handle the one up by Quebec with Bucky, Sam, and Natasha.”

“Why are we being separated?” Wanda asked suspiciously.

Steve met her eyes. “Because you’re the least experienced people on this team, and it’s plain bad
tactics to put both rookies in the same squad.” Also, he needed to see if they could work with the
Avengers independently of each other. If they could integrate with the team as two separate people,
not as a unit. If they couldn’t, it would pose problems, but he’d work around that. It was just better to
know from the start. Not that he would tell the Maximoffs all that—he’d discussed it with Tony and
Bucky and Natasha enough already.

She frowned.

Steve wasn’t going to change his mind on this.

“What about Sharon?” Maria asked. “She’s helped us out before. Since we’re so spread out—”

Steve glanced at Tony. “Do you know where she is?”

“Gimme a sec—”

“D.C. this week,” Natasha said.

Everyone stared at her.

“How do you know that?” Tony asked.

Clint was laughing quietly, head propped up in his hand.

Natasha shrugged. “I’m a spy. What, did you think I spent all my time working out and looking
gorgeous on the roof?”

Bucky grinned.

“Are you in on this too?” Steve asked, a slow smile creeping over his own face. He didn’t know
why he’d never questioned Natasha’s random multi-hour disappearances—he’d just figured she was
hiding in the vents somewhere, or wandering around the tower. She valued her alone time.

Bucky shrugged. “I can neither confirm nor deny.”

“I see how it is,” Sam said. “First I can’t sleep because of you, now this—”

Darcy choked. “Say what now?”

Tony, Clint, and Pietro burst out laughing.

“You trying to move in on my man, birdbrain?” Natasha said, throwing an arm around Bucky’s
shoulders.

“That’s not how I meant it!” Sam said, throwing up his hands. “I’ve had to silence my phone
because this idiot keeps texting me at three in the morning with pictures of birds doing weird shit!”

Steve coughed and started laughing himself. Along with half the table.

“Clever,” Loki said, smiling, and passed Bucky an approving nod.

Sam whacked him on the shoulder. Steve’s laughter died. Sam whacked Loki on the shoulder.
Loki’d paused, expressionless.

Sam was oblivious. “Right, yeah, all you superheroes ganging up on the normal guy. I’m out.” He
got up and marched off, but right before he turned away, Steve thought he saw a smile.
Loki relaxed a fraction. “I should go prepare as well.” He got up and left, brushing a hand over Darcy’s shoulder as he passed her seat. Steve narrowed his eyes, watching them. Something had changed between them recently.

“So… Sharon?” Clint said.

Natasha shrugged. “I don’t see why not. We can send her to Mexico. She can keep an eye on Tony.”

“I think I can successfully keep all eyes on me without you ordering Sharon around,” Tony said.

Maria smiled. “Not for the reasons you’d hope.”

“I’ll give her a call, then?” Steve asked. He couldn’t deny that he’d enjoy seeing Sharon again. She was clever, smart, kind, and undeniably skilled.

Tony shrugged. “Might as well.”

Jane and Helen, who’d remained silent and somewhat removed the whole time, exchanged glances.

“We’re going to head back downstairs,” Jane said.

Steve nodded absently. “Yeah, okay.”

“Don’t blow up my tower while I’m gone,” Tony shouted after them.

“Of all the people in this room, you are the most likely to blow up the tower,” Darcy informed him.

“Excuse you, I don’t blow up my own stuff,” Tony said. “Punch holes in it, yes, sometimes. No explosions.”

“No big explosions,” Natasha said. “There was that time with the car—”

“And when you tried modifying the Quinjet,” Bucky said.

Steve grinned. “Plus that time you were changing the protocols for the Iron Legion and two of them flew into each other in the hangar bay.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tony said loftily. “Come on, or Sam will beat us to the jets.”

“Okay, okay,” Steve said, still smiling. “Let’s go mess up some aliens.”

“Body collection,” Clint muttered. “Mutating space parasite body collection. Just when I thought my life had hit peak weird.”

“You should know better by know than to think there’s any such thing as peak weird,” Darcy said. “I’ll contact the UN while you gear up.”

“Have fun fucking with them,” Clint said.

Tony elbowed him. “For gosh sakes, watch your language!”

Steve rolled his eyes.
Neither Jane nor Helen spoke until they made it back to the lab.

Jane turned a graphing calculator over in her hands. Set it down and returned to fiddling with her ring.

She was determined not to speak first. She’d already made a fool of herself enough over this.

“When I told you I had a phone call to make…” Helen sounded uncharacteristically nervous. “I was talking to my brother.”

“I… didn’t know you had a brother,” Jane said slowly.

Helen nodded, looking distracted.

“And… why did you need to call your brother because I… asked you on a date?” Jane said.

“I’m asking him to do damage control,” Helen said bluntly. “If I were to get into a relationship with you, and it continued—I needed to know if he’d side with me against our other siblings and our parents.”

“Other siblings? Parents?” Jane was starting to see a picture here, but there was still a pane of bubble glass over the image. She’d never heard much about Helen’s childhood, or family.

Come to think of it, even in college, she’d never seemed to return home during holiday breaks…

“I’m the youngest of seven children,” Helen said. “My mother wanted little of me beyond making a marriage to an attractive, intelligent man poised to obtain a high-paying career. Da didn’t care much when I chose university instead, but Mother was furious—she’s part of the reason I chose to come to the United States, and the eastern seaboard at that.”

“She didn’t want you to get a degree?” Jane said. “But… you’re brilliant, it’d be a waste not to.”

“That’s what I said,” Helen agreed. “Ryu, my brother—he’s the next youngest, runs a company that invests people’s money for them—he helped me with the applications process, the entrance exams, talking to Da to finance my education. We were always close, and I think he felt like he owed me, because I kept the books for his company during high school when it was still in its neophyte stages.” She rolled her eyes. “You’d think mom would be happy; I have three older sisters and all of them made lovely rich influential marriages. But no, apparently she has to collect the whole set. I think she wanted to have another daughter to make up for my deficiencies. She’s… very traditional.”

Things were getting clearer. “And you wanted Ryu’s help in case… whatever this is… turns into a real relationship?” Jane said.

Helen nodded.

“But why couldn’t you just tell me that?”

“I didn’t want to hurt you,” Helen said, looking fiercely unapologetic. “If Ryu hadn’t agreed to help
me against our parents, and I did it anyway, they’d disown me. I didn’t… couldn’t decide until I’d talked to him. But he thinks he can keep the fallout to a minimum, since he only lives ten minutes from them—I don’t know how he stands it, honestly—and he told me to… go for it.”

Jane hardly knew what to think. “So… you’re saying yes?”

“I… yeah,” Helen said, and laughed a little. “I guess I am.”

“I always assumed you were straight,” Jane admitted.

Helen shrugged. “I never gave it much consideration. I knew if I married, it would be a long, long way into the future. I haven’t had time for romance for most of my adult life. But when you asked, I realized—I wanted to. It hit me like a ton of bricks, and I—didn’t know what to say. I should’ve just asked for some time to think, but… That’s when I knew I had to talk to Ryu. I panicked a little bit.”

“What if Ryu had said no?” Jane said, fiercely glad she wasn’t the only one uncertain of herself here, and cautiously hopeful. “That—that he didn’t want you to… go out with me?”

“I—” Helen bit her lip, the first nervous tic she’d ever shown. “I think I would’ve done it anyway. Jane, I—care about you. But it… might have taken longer for me to get there. Here.” Her face was tight. “I didn’t have friends growing up—our family was very tight-knit, and my parents were relatively controlling. Ryu’s the most important relationship in my life, both platonic and familial. His acceptance—support—it means a lot to me.”

Jane considered. This sounded like what Darcy had once described as a ‘roundabout apology’. Like Helen wouldn’t say the words I’m sorry but knew she owed Jane an explanation for the pain she’d caused. And she understood why Helen had done it, she really did—not everyone had had Darcy around for years; not everyone could so easily accept that they were attracted to someone of the same gender. Especially when their parents wouldn’t approve. Jane wasn’t on the best of terms with her parents, but neither was she on the worst, and she knew family approval could be a powerful motivator.

And she knew Helen well enough to know that while Helen might be sorry for hurting Jane, she didn’t regret any of it.

That was okay. It had worked out.

“Okay,” she said.

Helen met her eyes. “Okay?”

“Okay, I understand.” Jane took a deep breath. “So… tomorrow? At seven? Dinner? I can have Tony pick the restaurant, he knows this area really well.”

“Not tonight, because we might need to be here for technical support if these missions go sideways?” Helen said.

“Yes.”

Helen smiled, and it was like the sun coming out. “It’s a date.”
Pietro stepped out of the jet and looked around. His first thought was that Alaska was beautiful in a would-kill-you-without-warning kind of way. His second was that humans weren’t meant to live here. His third was that this was not at all where he’d expected his life to end up.

“Ready?” Clint said, glancing over at him. “This could get… weird.”

“Weirder than it already is?” Pietro said.

Clint glanced back up the ramp. Bruce was talking and Loki was listening. “This shit can always get weirder. I used to think I knew weird. I’m an orphan raised by carnies fighting with a stick and string from the Paleolithic era, killing and spying around the world for a top-secret government agency with my best friend who happens to be an enhanced ninety-year-old ex-KGB assassin. And you know what? I was so unbelievably wrong.”

Pietro laughed.

Loki strolled down the ramp towards them. As usual, even though he was disguised, just him coming closer turned on some primal instinct in Pietro’s head to run. He didn’t know how Wanda spent so much time with the guy, except that his sister found Loki and his magic fascinating. Personally, Pietro thought it was creepy—mostly because he had yet to get a sense of Loki’s power limits—but Wanda made her own choices.

Loki stopped and surveyed the landscape. They weren’t too far from civilization, but Pietro had seen the maps and he knew no one would find them here. And even if someone did, Pietro had the distinct feeling that the unfortunate person would wake up twenty miles away with a headache and no memory of the previous hour. Or year. Depending on how charitable Loki was feeling.

“So… where’s the creepy alien army?” Clint asked. “Because this looks like a whole lot of glacier and not a whole lot else.”

Loki raised a hand and said a few of the magic words that Pietro had figured out slid right through your brain. He was left with nothing but the memory of sound that tingled.

“What’re you doing?” Clint said. Pietro noticed that there was no fear on Clint’s face. No concern that Loki was doing something to harm them.

“Shielding us from detection, and looking for… traces… of… aha,” Loki said. “Seidr wielded in this area. I believe I’ve found the portal location. This way.”

Bruce took off in the jet as Loki set off across the snow. He seemed completely unbothered by the cold; he was wearing standard tact gear except with no visible weapons. Clint and Pietro, on the other hand, were geared up in extra layers and Tony’s new heat-regulating thermotech in their suits.

Pietro didn’t know how different the black-and-purple body armor was from Clint’s normal gear, but he had to admit he was really enjoying what Tony had made for him. It consisted of a blue tech shirt and black pants that looked like normal running clothes, except the shirt went over a fitted black underlayer of body armor that would block some conventional weapons. Tony hadn’t made the
armor too thick, since Pietro could dodge just about any bullet or blow, and instead designed it to
minimize energy loss and regulate his temperature. The shoes were extra-durable and had some kind
of smart tech in the soles for traction, plus an adaptive carbon fiber structure in the mesh on the sides
and top to keep them completely steady on his feet. Even the fabric of the shirt and pants had been
treated to be heat-resistant and friction-reducing. How Tony had pulled the entire thing together in
the course of a few days, Pietro had no clue.

But he was… grateful.

And he kind of hated being grateful to Tony Stark, but there it was.

“I don’t see anything.” Bruce sounded anxious in the comms. “Are you sure—”

“It’s here,” Loki said confidently.

Pietro trudged along behind Clint and Loki, getting more frustrated with every slow, laboring step.
He could cover this entire area in seconds. They were so impossibly stuck. Everything was so much
easier at speed. Living without his ability already seemed like a strange dream—like he’d been half-asleep the whole time. And now he couldn’t trust his own head not to have been meddled with by Hydra. He could only trust his sister and his gift.

Sometimes he wished he could just spend his entire life running. Leaving the world behind, stopping
only to eat or sleep.

But he’d leave Wanda behind too.

Loki stopped.

Pietro would’ve bumped into Clint if he’d still processed things at a normal person’s speed.

“Find something?” Clint asked.

Loki glared at the ground. “It is right beneath us,” he said. “But I do not know how to find an
entrance without quite literally causing an earthquake, which would likely alert our enemies to our
presence.”

“No way they’re not watching the surface somehow,” Clint agreed. “Even if it’s a way we can’t
detect.” He looked uncomfortable at the thought.

Loki hmmm ed in agreement. “I would prefer not to expend more seidr than necessary this early, on
the chance that I must face another mage.”

“No way they’re not watching the surface somehow,” Clint agreed. “Even if it’s a way we can’t
detect.” He looked uncomfortable at the thought.

Loki narrowed his eyes. “Bruce?”
Pietro’s earpiece crackled. “Yes?”

“Is your control fine enough to drop onto the ice in your other form and lead them on a chase? Away from civilization.”

Bruce hesitated. “I…”

“If you can’t, it’s not a problem,” Clint said. “We’ll figure out another way.”

“We’re miles from any town,” Pietro said. “This is Alaska.”

“The other guy has traveled the length of South America in less than thirty-six hours on foot,” Bruce snapped.

Pietro’s eyes widened. The hell did he do to himself?

Clint snorted at his expression. “We’ve all been there, kid. Bruce, seriously, if you don’t want to—”

“I want to help,” Bruce said. “But if they start shooting, the… other guy… doesn’t tend to think in nuances.”

Loki and Clint shared a glance.

“Stay in the jet, then,” Pietro said. He wasn’t one hundred percent sure of this idea, but he felt an irritating need to convince them he was worth—worth bringing along. That he could contribute. So far he hadn’t done much except sit in his room and recover. “Turn off the cloaking technology and buzz this area a few times, then pretend the jet’s taken a hit and fly low and slow to the northeast.”

There was a pause.

“That is… not actually a terrible idea,” Loki said.

Pietro scowled at him and put as much sarcasm in his voice as he could. Which was a lot. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“You are most welcome,” Loki said with a smirk.

“Don’t take it personally, he’s like that with everyone,” Clint said, clapping Loki on the shoulder. “It’s a good plan, kid. Bruce? What do you think? This way we save the big guy for the last resort.”

“If we can draw out the alien parasite things, we can figure out how to get in,” Pietro agreed. “And get out of this weather.”

“I like how you think,” Clint said with a grin, then looked at Loki. “Do you have like a warming-up spell or something going?”

“No, I am—not as susceptible to cold as mortals,” Loki said.

An expression flitted across his face. Once Hydra realized the improved processing speed of his brain gave him a massive advantage in reading microexpressions like this, Strucker had started training Pietro in how to read them. It had gone on only a few days before the Avengers showed up and everything went to hell, but Pietro knew enough to read Loki’s. It was there and gone faster than any normal person would be able to detect but he saw fear, discomfort, rage, and hatred.

He frowned. What the shit? It was a simple question, and a simple answer. Why had Loki’s reaction been so extreme?
“Ready,” Bruce said. “Disabling cloaking tech… now.”

Pietro craned his head back. There was the jet, high above, a growing speck against the cold blue sky. The roar of its engine reached him a second later.

He buzzed the snowy tundra once, twice, three times.


Pietro crouched, twisting his feet into the snow to get decent traction if he had to take off on short notice.

Twenty meters to their left, a circle of snow was dropping into the earth.

“Let’s move,” Clint hissed.

Loki took point, as they’d discussed on the plane, since he had the firepower. Pietro stuck close while Clint ranged a little back and to the left, keeping an eye on everything, as he preferred.

They were almost to the edge of the hole when the rumble of machinery stopped.

“Hold,” Clint breathed through the comms.

They all paused and crouched. Pietro felt horribly exposed. He wanted to run, to blur out of sight and mind, but he’d been ordered to stay close. Since they didn’t fully trust him yet. It was fair, and he had to admit that, even though it was annoying as hell.

Then the first Daavit crept out of the hole, and all Pietro’s worries about whether Loki’s concealment magic was up to the job vanished.

They were things torn out of fever dreams. The picture hadn’t done it justice, and neither had Loki’s descriptions, not really.

There were three of them. The one in front had a long, low body, with too many legs, all of them irregularly placed and mismatched and angular with too many joints, or in a few cases, no joints at all. The part that appeared to be the head was sunken into the top of its greenish-brown body. Everything that wasn’t leg was covered in some kind of gelatinous membrane. It moved in a disconnected horror-movie way that somehow suggested it could move extremely fast when it put its mind to it. If it even had a mind.

The other two were both of a taller build. One had three legs resting on the ground, the other four, but both had other limbs that seemed like they could be used for walking or running. Short tentacles tipped with blades of some kind waved menacingly all over the torso (ish) of one of them, which also appeared to have neither head nor arms. The other one was the opposite—too many arms, and a row of bulging eyes that wrapped all the way around a head that was halfway sunken into the top of a shortish body. In fact, looking closer, the third monster was the only one with recognizable eyes at all. Pietro decided he didn’t need to know exactly how the other two saw.

“Motherfucker,” Clint hissed.

“Good thing Steve’s not here,” Bruce said, but his voice was strained. “What are these things?”

“If you take one alive, you may study it,” Loki said in a low voice. “I would suggest the one in the lead. It appears built for tracking and pursuit, not offensive maneuvers.”
“Deal,” Bruce said. “I’d love to cut that thing open. How do I kill them?”

“Each has a nerve center,” Loki said, voice low. The lead monster appeared to be… sniffing. The oily membrane rippled along its back and ‘head’. It turned toward them momentarily and Pietro’s heart kicked into overdrive, power surging through his fasttwitch muscle fibers. He could barely hold himself still.

It turned away, back toward the jet.

Pietro sighed with relief.

“Not nerves as you would recognize them,” Loki continued. “But they do use chemical signals to convey messages. The one with spikes on its center of mass—the center of consciousness is likely hidden in the middle for protection. The other upright Daavit’s nerve center will be near the optic centers—you can see its head on the cameras. And the stealth-pursuit one in the lead—”

“I can see its head,” Bruce said. “I’ve got these.”

He banked and came toward them.

The monsters chittered.

The lead one reared up on some of its back legs. The membrane surged and thickened near the end that waved in the air, reaching toward the jet. The spiky one crouched and its tentacles all shivered and pointed at the jet.

Several of the small spikes fired somehow, aiming at the jet as it buzzed overhead. Pietro squinted. At least two hit their mark, lodging in its hide.

“They hit me?” Bruce said. “What the—”

“Small blades lodged in the wing,” Pietro said. “Shouldn’t pose a problem.”

“It’s testing the plane,” Clint agreed.

With a clacking sound, the lead monster fell to the ground and started moving. If it had been horror-movie before, now it was worse—bunching and extending, not totally straight or even as its many different legs surged forward at different rates. But it was fast. Enough that Pietro actually thought racing it would be a challenge. He’d win, of course; it wasn’t going fast enough to blur out of sight, but even for Pietro going fast enough to be invisible was hard.

“Now,” Loki said. “While they’re distracted.”

Pietro lunged.

The world stretched and blurred around him and he was running, he was free, and fear couldn’t touch him anymore.

He circled the lip of the hole. Took in what was visible from there and returned to his place at Loki’s side before either Loki or Clint had moved more than two steps.

The weight of normal speed fell back onto his shoulders. The first time he’d come back from a real sprint, he’d staggered and fallen over from the transition. By now he knew how to manage the shift without a hitch.

“You are useful as a scout,” Loki said with an appraising glance. Pietro resisted the urge to step back
under his coldly calculating eyes. “What did you see?”

“The circle’s dropped into the ground about ten feet,” Pietro said. “Just darkness around it. None of
the other monsters in sight, but then again, it was completely black down there.”

Clint joined them. “Do they not use light to see?”

“Some,” Loki said. “Not all. Not even most, if I remember correctly.”

“Also, it’s just a bad idea to put floodlights near the entrance to your secret underground base,” Clint
said.

Pietro laughed. He was beginning to like this Avenger, against his better judgment.

Loki smiled thinly. “Shall we?”

“Let’s do this,” Clint said. He nocked an arrow from the full quiver on his back. Pietro eyed his bow
—it was a beautiful, complex, lethal-looking weapon. “I’m ready to put a few holes in these
bastards.”

Pietro flexed his feet inside the shoes Tony’d made for him. Even his quick run had been enough to
tell how superior they were—they stayed in place and had fantastic traction.

“Ready,” he said.

Loki moved forward. There was a long, slightly curved blade in his left hand—Pietro wasn’t sure
where it had come from. Clint followed.

Pietro brought up the rear. He glanced once off to the right, where the jet and its pursuers had already
gotten tiny with distance.

Don’t Hulk out, he thought at Bruce, and dropped into the aliens’ base with Loki and Clint.

He’d never admit it to them, but he was biting back fear.
Chapter 160

[Classified Location], Quebec Province, Canada

April 2012

“This is a secure channel?” Bucky asked.

Pauk shrugged. “So Tony says.”

Left unsaid was their mutual ingrained paranoia. Bucky absently leaned closer until their arms were lightly touching. She shot him a quick smile, the soft kind she only showed him.

Their mutual agreement was silent. There’d be no speaking of secret things over the comms. Just in case.

Bucky’s phone dinged.

He frowned and pulled it out. The modern technology had come easier to him than it had to Steve, apparently; it seemed that he’d been exposed to enough tech in the nineties before he was frozen that at least some of the new kind came to him intuitively. But he’d still had quite a learning curve, and he wasn’t sure why exactly it was making noise.

A text notification. From Sam.

Another one. And another.

Pauk laughed silently, seeing the screen. “Open them,” she whispered.

Bucky glanced up at the cockpit. Steve was flying the jet—he could’ve put it on autopilot, but he said actually flying was calming; Bucky suspected it was Steve’s trust issues coming to the fore—and Sam was leaning against the inside of the hull, deliberately not looking back at Bucky and Natasha.

With a swipe, he opened the texts.

Bucky muttered a swear word in Russian. Natasha snorted.

All three pictures were of raccoons. One was stuck hanging from a branch. Another was at the bottom of the Dumpster, glaring at the camera with reflective yellow eyes. And the third raccoon had an icicle stuck to its tongue.

Bucky glared at Sam, who appeared to be smirking at the windshield.

Natasha elbowed him. She’d been woken up by the faint glow of his phone screen in the black hours of early morning when he was sending Sam picture after picture of stupid birds. “You deserve this,” she informed him.

Bucky huffed and turned off the phone.

An audible snort came from the cockpit.

“Arriving in ten minutes,” Friday said over the onboard PA system. “Prepare for infiltration.”
“Why can’t she just say ‘suit up’ or something?” Sam complained.

“I am programmed to speak with a certain diction threshold,” Friday said. “If you prefer, I can use ‘suit up’ instead.”

Natasha grinned at Sam. “Good job, irritate the AI.”

“I do not have the capacity for irritation,” Friday said dispassionately. “Though if I did, Mr. Wilson would be the most likely on this aircraft to irritate me.”

“Hey!” Sam protested.

Bucky laughed.

“I don’t know why I put up with this,” Sam grumbled. “Even the computer’s giving me shit.”

“Careful, Falcon,” Pauk said with a smirk. “Cap doesn’t like that kind of language.”

Steve paused, grinning, one hand reaching into his locker. “You know what, Romanoff…”

She shot him a sultry smile and raised her eyebrows.

“Okay, seriously, stop dragging this out and show us what Tony made you,” Sam said, throwing a crumpled-up gum wrapper at Steve. He’d already shrugged on his wingsuit and done up half the attachments. It locked securely in place around the new body armor Tony had designed and looked, Bucky had to admit, very intimidating. “Does the suit light up with flag patterns now?”

Steve shrugged, looking suddenly a bit uncomfortable. “It… um. No.”

“Put him out of his misery, Rogers,” Natasha advised. She seemed occupied with adjusting the belt around her hips and the various lethal weapons hidden away in her suit’s hidden pockets and elegant holsters, but Bucky knew her well enough to tell that she was just as interested as Sam.

Bucky himself didn’t really care what Steve wore into a fight, as long as it worked.

Or so he thought, until Steve pulled out a new suit, done entirely in black and silver. Even his shield was now completely colorless, returned to the sheen of unadorned vibranium.

Bucky blinked.

“Whoa,” Sam said. “That’s, um. Badass looking. Also, not at all what I was expecting. Isn’t the patriotic red-white-and-blue your whole schtick?”

“It was,” Steve said. He didn’t seem to know where to look. “I guess—we’re not attached to any one country, right? America is—a lot of amazing things. But we’re supposed to fight for everyone who can’t stand up to themselves. Plus I’m not a huge fan of how Ross has been treating us lately, and he’s got the green light for all his policies from President Caldwell, so—yeah.”

There was a pause.

Bucky poked the suit. It was made of the same fabric as his own—tough, wicking material—as a base layer, with body armor that layered on top in shades of black with silver-gray accents. The helmet was matte black. The pants were similar to cargo pants, except lighter and more fitted, with a number of holsters and pockets designed for weapons, grenades, and other nasty surprises.

Sam started laughing.
“Well, this will definitely send a message,” Natasha said, looking somewhere between amused and proud.

Steve looked at Bucky, almost—hesitant.

Bucky cocked his head. The American flag was more than just a country’s flag, to him—it stood for freedom, and justice, and equality, because even though America wasn’t perfect, it was doing better on all those counts than any other nation. It had been in his last memories from before the war (compared to how the rest of the world had been then) and based on everything he’d learned in the last year about the world’s current state of affairs, the same was still true.

But he couldn’t really blame Steve for doing this. They weren’t freedom fighters anymore. They weren’t even really soldiers. They were a team of spies, assassins, leaders, inventors, scientists. Outcasts, really. Stealth colors suited their new roles much better than the flashy red-white-and-blue.

“I like it,” he said at last.

The smile Steve sent him was blinding. It was obvious he’d been waiting for Bucky’s feedback. Somewhat anxiously.

Bucky did his best to smile back. He was still remembering how it felt to smile sincerely, and widely, like he had before—how to let himself be vulnerable.

“Okay, now put it on, drama king,” Sam said. “We’ve only got like five more minutes.”

The base was aboveground.

“This is too easy,” Bucky said.

They’d dropped into the forest and approached on foot, leaving Friday to circle the jet, cloaked, above their heads. There was a barbed-wire fence around the base, but Natasha and Bucky had cut through it while Sam and Steve scouted. They’d returned reporting no guard presence at all, and continued to find no one the farther in they got.

“Are we sure this is the place?” Natasha asked.

“Tony caught motion here on satellite,” Steve said. “Vision flew overhead two days ago and registered life-forms that are definitely not human.”

“They’re probably keeping a low profile so this place looks abandoned,” Sam said.

Steve pointed at the logo on a rusted van with flat tires. “This used to be SHIELD.”

“Fury probably knew about it,” Natasha said. Her face was cold, the mask of the killer slipping into place. Bucky knew he looked the same and didn’t care.

This was the monster the KGB and Hydra had worked so hard to put in each of them. He knew it’d never really leave.

And, honestly, he was glad of it.

Steve’s arm snapped up, fist clenched.

They all ducked down, lining up instinctively behind two concrete barricades for cover.
Sam twisted his arm. The screen on his forearm lit up and he tapped at it. The drone on his back detached and zipped silently away, around the side of an outbuilding.

“Two of them,” he said softly. “Oh, what the fuck?”


Natasha, crouched next to Sam, glanced down at the screen and made a face. “That’s new.”

“Good new or bad new?” Steve asked.

Sam angled the screen so Steve and Bucky could see.

Bucky understood Sam and Natasha’s reactions.

The creatures were walking across the open space in front of the main building, which was about the size of a large high school. Well, actually, walking wasn’t really the right word for what they were doing. One of them looked like a cross between a starfish and a spider; five multicolored many-jointed legs sprang from an irregular, bulbous body and carried it along, moving with a creepy and indistinct pattern. Bucky kept waiting for it to trip on itself but it never did. The other one seemed to be rolling; somehow, as the drone’s cameras zoomed in, Bucky saw it had grown a solid bit of flesh through the center of a set of wheels, and propelled itself by blowing something gaseous out of its… rear. The entire upper body of the thing was sticklike and almost flimsy, except for the fact that every single one of its many arms was long, brownish-black, and tipped with three curved claws that dripped some kind of oil. Bucky was willing to bet the oil was either poisonous or corrosive or both.

“Loki wasn’t kidding about these things,” Steve muttered. He looked horrified. “At least Red Skull was humanoid.”

Bucky shifted his grip on his rifle. He was already itching to shoot these things down. They were perverted, sick. They shouldn’t be anywhere near his planet.

“Loki said they can be killed if you destroy the nerve center,” Natasha said, pulling Sam’s arm back toward her and examining the image clinically. “I’m guessing the wheeled one’s is somewhere near the heavy bit down by its base; the rest of the torso’s too small and probably taken up by structure for the support of those arms. And the other one is definitely in that middle section.”

“Do we take them down?” Bucky asked. “It’d give away our presence.”

Steve shook his head. “Not this early.”

Sam made a face. “They’re headed off base.”

“Hunting?” Natasha asked.

“I wish Loki were here to translate what they’re saying,” Sam muttered. “I don’t want them heading for that town a few miles out and… reproducing.”

Bucky hadn’t thought of that. Based on the expressions on Natasha and Steve’s faces, they hadn’t either.

“Sam, you want to run interference?” Steve said. “Wait until they’re a few miles out, then take them down if they’re headed toward the town. I agree—we can’t let those things anywhere near a population center.”
Sam checked the modified semiautomatic strapped to his right arm. “Just say the word.”

“Any other movement on the base?” Steve asked.

“Redwing hasn’t seen any.”

“Go,” Natasha said. “We can get in from here.”

“See you on the other side,” Sam said, and then he was gone, creeping back the way they’d come. He’d take off once he made it to the trees.

Moving as a unit, Bucky, Natasha, and Steve crept forward again. They stayed low and stuck to the shadows. Natasha ranged off to one side, slipping in and out of sight, while Steve covered Bucky’s six. They fell easily into their old patterns, cycling between one in front and one behind, always watching each other’s back. It was simple to factor Natasha into the equation after how long Bucky had worked with her, and after their many training sessions.

This was familiar. And it wasn’t just a sense of déjà vu anymore. He could now remember most of his years with Natasha.

It was the time before and after her that still came up mostly blank.

“Main entrance up ahead,” Natasha whispered through the comms. “If we sneak in, we’re sure to set off all kinds of perimeter alarms.”

“Wait for some of them to leave?” Steve suggested.

“Or just go high,” Natasha said. “Upstairs window.”

“Wait.” Bucky frowned. “We were only coming here to figure out whether or not there was actually a… group of Daavi here. I think we’ve established that pretty well. So either we pull back now, regroup, talk it over with the team—”

“—or infiltrate and try to get a sense of their numbers,” Natasha finished. “That’s what I’m thinking.”

“We could also bring the fight to them,” Steve said. “We’re all enhanced, and deadly.”

“But we don’t know how many they are,” Natasha said. “Let’s try to stay undercover as long as possible.”

“Copy that. Find us an entrance?”

“Done.” Bucky caught a glimpse of Natasha’s short-cropped red hair. “Swing around the north side of the building.”

They worked their way over to her. Bucky’s every breath sounded too loud; he hated the crunch of half-frozen dirt beneath his boots. They were far enough north, and at a high enough altitude, that patches of snow spackled the ground and a definite chill hung in the air.

“High three o’clock,” Natasha said.

Bucky glanced up, confident Steve would keep his eyes on their surroundings. Without Sam and his drone eyes, they had to be extra careful. They pressed themselves against the side of a small manufactured outbuilding, and peered around the corner at the main structure.
Natasha clung to the side of the building, almost invisible against the dark roof and gray paint. She broke her perfect stillness to reach to her side and lay a hand on the sill of the window she meant.

“Head up,” Steve said softly. “I’ll cover you.”

Bucky nodded, slung his rifle over his back, and was gone in an instant.

He dashed across the open space, automatically scanning to the left and right with every step but most of his awareness focused on the building in front of him and how he’d ascend three stories without making too much noise.

There was a carved stone sign with **SHIELD** carved on it next to a side entrance. Bucky vaulted onto the sign and then launched himself up without a pause. His hands found purchase on the edge of the second-story roof and he pulled his body up, rolling over the edge and to his feet in a second, one pistol half-drawn in case of a threat. None came. He let it fall back into the holster and kept moving, creeping swiftly but lightly across the roof.

A metal drainpipe gave him purchase to scale the next level. He swung up and somersaulted across the remaining open space, then came up beneath the eave five feet from Natasha, and froze.

For several seconds, nothing moved.


Bucky pulled his rifle forward and tucked himself back against the wall, raising it to sweep the courtyard.

Steve bolted from his cover. The new suit was much less flashy than his old one, Bucky noted with approval. He took the same path up the building Bucky had, and thirty seconds later all three of them were crouched on the roof tiles, Steve on one side of the window and Natasha and Bucky on the other.

“Break it?” Steve whispered.

Pauk shook her head and pulled a tiny black cylinder and a suction cup off her belt.

Bucky stood above her as she crouched, attached the suction cup to the glass, and aimed the cylinder. Steve turned and aimed his gun at the courtyard below, shield on his back, while Natasha used the tiny and almost soundless diamond cutter to carve the window glass out of the pane.

She got a grip on the suction cup from the side, finished the last of the cut, and slowly, silently pulled the glass free of the window.

*Hand signals,* she signed. *Shield, go.*

Natasha switched to covering the courtyard while Steve traded his rifle for his shield and stepped in front of the window. Bucky slid into place, flat on the roof.

Steve swung through the window and landed in a crouch with his shield up. Bucky rolled over and up, rifle at the ready to cover Steve from behind, barrel just peeking through the empty frame.

Clear, he signed.

Bucky dropped through next, and finally Natasha.

They were in an upstairs hallway. Dim yellowish lights lined the ceiling and an undisturbed carpet of
dust coated the floor.

Natasha hissed through her teeth to get their attention and pointed up at the ceiling.

Bucky squinted and looked closer, then drew back in revulsion.

The bad lighting had hidden, at first, that a thick layer of reddish slime covered the ceiling.

*Be careful*, Steve signed, and by unspoken agreement, they kept to the edges of the hallway as they crept along. At every door they passed, Natasha or Bucky paused to do thermal and X-ray scans with their eyepieces. Every room turned up empty—old SHIELD office buildings, most likely, or possibly storage.

A low slurping sound came from ahead, around a bend in the hall.

In a second, Steve was crouching with his shield up, Bucky was half-standing with his rifle over Steve’s shoulder, and Natasha was pressed flat against the wall behind him.

Nothing happened for a count of four.

The sound came again.

Steve eased forward. Without breaking formation, Bucky and Pauk followed. He felt her light touch on his lower back, just once. A brief *I’m here*. It was unnecessary—he trusted her completely to be watching his sides and rear—but a comfort nonetheless.

The Daavit, when it came into view, was no more pleasant than the last two.

Its blobby body, about four feet in diameter, rolled along the ceiling. Somehow, a loose outer skin covered in octopus-like suction cups seemed to move like a tank’s treads around the thing’s circumference, while from the sides, it sprouted feelers or tentacles that waved gently in the air.

Bucky’s grip tightened. His finger slipped inside the trigger guard. He pulled back on the trigger, just slightly. This was the rifle he usually used, and he knew exactly how much pressure he could apply before it fired.

*Wait*, Steve signed with his free hand. *It might not see us.*

The Daavit stopped moving.

Natasha flipped out from behind Bucky and threw three blades in quick succession.

With shocking speed, the Daavit knocked one of them aside, its feelers lashing out. The second knife it actually *caught*. The third spun past its guard and sank into the thing’s body with a squelching noise, tearing the membrane it used to move. Natasha had aimed well—the blade sank through the leading edge of the creature and into the ceiling, pinning it there unless it tore the knife out of its own flesh.

Bucky was moving almost as soon as the blades hit home. He rolled as the thing threw her second knife back at them. Heard Steve deflect it as he launched up and lashed out with a butterfly knife spinning around his fingers. The ploy worked—all its feelers came at him and he sliced off at least five of them before he hit the ground and dove aside.

Steve moved in, also using blades.

The thing spat a stream of that reddish slime. Most of it splattered off the shield, but some sprayed
over Steve’s arm.

He grunted in pain, dropped his knives, and hit the floor.

Bucky yanked out a silenced pistol and pumped an entire magazine into the thing.

It shuddered, let loose a high-pitched chattering shriek of rage, and slowly, slowly peeled off the ceiling and smacked to the floor.

Natasha was already at Steve’s side, cutting his sleeve away. Bucky saw the skin beneath was raw and smoking slightly. The scent of burned hair reached him.

Okay? he signed.

Steve nodded, jaw tight. Bucky took the shield and gave them cover while Steve pulled a compact bandage out of a compartment on his suit and quickly field dressed the wound. They’d need to clean it as soon as possible.

“Can you fight with it?” Natasha whispered.

“I’ve had worse,” Steve said, also softly. “I fell forty stories through a glass ceiling, remember?”

“Fair point.” Natasha picked up her knives. Two of them were clean—the one it had knocked aside and the one it had thrown back. She sheathed those and nudged the third with her toe.

“Hilt’s clean,” Bucky said. “Could be useful if we find any human Hydra people.”

Natasha shot him a quick grin and picked it up, carrying it loosely in her left hand.

They proceeded.
Chapter 161

[Classified Location], Central Mexico

April 2012

Tony was itching to jump out of the jet and start setting things on fire.

It was his own fault, really, that he couldn’t. He’d designed his own suit with everything except subtlety built in.

But it killed him to wait for Vision to come back from reconnaissance.

Tony’s flashbacks were few and far between now. It was the strangest thing—when he was actually in a fight, he had no trouble. It was sudden door slams during a meeting, people coming up behind him in the lobby, flashes of light, occasionally someone accidentally sending his thoughts in a bad direction in conversation—though the last almost never happened anymore. He’d almost decked a reporter for grabbing his arm a month ago.

So, even though he was a scientist, he didn’t exactly love fighting, but there was a sort of pleasure in it. And he definitely had a hell of a time killing people who’d done the world a disservice.

Vision phased through the floor.

Sharon shot him.

The bullets simply bounced off of Vision’s chest and head. He stared at her.

Tony snorted.

“Sorry,” she said, slowly reholstering her gun. “I’m… still not used to that.”

“Neither am I, and I live with him,” Wanda muttered.

That was new. She’d been sitting in the back of the jet and hadn’t spoken since she’d been introduced to Sharon when they swung through D.C. Tony decided to take it as a good sign that Wanda was willing to joke, and return the smile Sharon sent her way.

“I thought to save time by not requiring you to open the bay door,” Vision said, looking vaguely embarrassed.

Tony rolled his eyes. “We talked about this. You’re less than a year old and you just discovered you could walk through walls last week, I’d do a lot worse than scare Sharon into putting a few bullet holes into the jet with that power, but can we stick to the topic? Alien invasion, remember?”

“Yes,” Vision said, looking away from Wanda. “The Daavit seem to have occupied an abandoned military base in the foothills. It is ten point seven miles south-southwest of a nearby town. The town appears to be having some sort of celebration.”

“Market day,” Maria said. “In this part of the country, it’s common for everyone to gather on Saturday. Makes it easier on the farmers.”

“Which means everyone for miles is there,” Sharon said.
“We’ll keep their fire concentrated then,” Tony said. “If we have to run, we go north or east.”

“Is this still an observatory mission?” Sharon said. “We originally just wanted to find out if they were really here, but we’ve established that pretty conclusively.”

She was handling the whole alien parasite thing impressively well. Tony wasn’t sure if—if she was ready to hear more of their secrets, but she was a good soldier, and Steve and Maria liked her. That was enough for him.

And he’d take any help he could get to bring Thanos and Fury to their knees. Tony didn’t think he had the stomach, or the skill, to kill them as painfully as they deserved to die.

But Loki did. Plus plenty of motivation.

Tony would happily watch.

But bringing Sharon in wasn’t his call—he had to keep reminding himself he was a teammate, he had a family, he didn’t have to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders without help anymore. It was still disconcerting to realize. Almost uncomfortable to change the way he’d operated for as long as he could remember.

He had to keep reminding himself he wasn’t alone anymore.

“Tony.”

“What?” Damn it, I checked out again.

Maria sighed. “Did you hear any of what I just said?”

“Spaced out,” he said.

“The main point was that we are in communication with Darcy, and both of the other teams have elected to attempt infiltrations of their respective targets,” Vision said. “We should do so as well to gain better knowledge of their numbers and objective here.”

“Sounds great. But just in case you haven’t noticed, my skills don’t really gear towards ‘stealth espionage,’” Tony said.

Wanda sucked in a breath.

“What if we—” Maria began.

“What were you going to say, Wanda?” Tony interrupted. You’re not alone. He didn’t want her to be, either. Even if he still hadn’t decided whether he liked the clever, quiet, damaged young woman.

Wanda glanced down. “They will know, after today, that we have found them. You could simply create a diversion while the rest of us sneak in.”

Maria angled her head. “Better than leaving him in the jet as a backup plan. In terms of personality, not tactics,” she said. “I’d prefer you as a backup, but—”

“I think we all know he won’t just sit in here,” Sharon agreed.

“I am offended,” Tony said in a very not offended tone. “Diversion sounds more like my specialty, though. You’re all suited up?” He cast a quick, critical eye over the thermosuits Maria and Sharon had both donned, modified to their usual preferences with other items on top. The new body armor
he’d designed significantly cut down the bulk and weight of tact gear. *I’m a fucking genius.*

Sharon rolled her shoulders. “Can I keep the suit?”

“Don’t give it to the CIA,” Tony said. “And only if you don’t break it.”

Sharon, Maria, and Wanda slung parachute packs onto their backs. According to Loki, Wanda was learning how to fly, but she still wasn’t stable enough to drop from seven thousand feet. Friday would man the jet, cloaked, until they were ready to go.

Tony opened the bay doors. Maria, Sharon, and Wanda leapt out, Vision following to guide them to a decent landing site.

It wasn’t Tony’s problem. He fired his thrusters, roaring away from the jet.

“Gimme a sitrep.”

“Scanning.” On his HUD, the building lit up with blue lines. Tony screamed closer as he sifted through them quickly.

“There. Big blank wall, what’s it hiding?”

“Thermal readings suggest that is the main power core for the complex.”

Tony fired a rocket.

The small white explosive shot toward the wall he’d seen. He flung out his hands and increased power, hurtling back up in a neat parabola.

An explosion rocked the foothills. The fireball that bloomed where the generators had been seemed almost lazy.

“Oops,” Tony said.

“Power offline… coming back on. They must have backup generators.”

“Did I at least get their attention?”

“I am detecting increased biological activity within,” Vision chimed in.

“Getting attention is your specialty,” Wanda said.

Tony launched a couple miniature guided explosives toward hotspots along the top floor. There was movement inside the exposed sections of the building now, plus some weird waily alarm that sounded like a terrible bagpipe-and-beginner-violin duet. “Hang on, was that an actual joke?”

“Don’t make me regret it,” Wanda snapped.

“Moving up on the west side of the complex,” Maria said. “Let’s go nonverbal. We don’t know how these things communicate.”

“Definitely audio, for at least some of them. That goddamn siren,” Tony complained.

Static over comms. That was odd. He tried to hail his teammates, got nothing. *Must be a jammer.* Their entry point—an underground escape tunnel—wasn’t so deep that his comms tech couldn’t handle it.
The movement coalesced into silhouettes. He had other things to focus on—*They’re perfectly capable of handling themselves*, he insisted to himself. *Deal with these problems—that’s the best thing you can do for them.*

He squinted. The HUD highlighted the flying forms—at least two dozen of them—and then zoomed in.

Tony’s eyes widened.

They were perverse, but—fascinatingly so.

He hoped someone managed to bag one for Bruce and Helen to cut open. There was a lot to be learned from these things.

“Friday, put any excess processing power on compiling a database of these things,” he said. “Pictures, abilities exhibited by each one, et cetera. I wanna go back through all of it later. Pull any footage or audio records from the other teams, too.”

“You got it, boss.”

An ‘incoming projectile’ alert lit up his HUD. Tony twisted and dove to avoid the hail of metal spikes. Some looked vicious; others were glowing an eerie purple.

“Vision, if you get a chance, collect some of those spikes,” Tony said.

No response, but he wasn’t expecting one.

Two of the Daavi lifted oddly *swirly* weapons. With muffled snapping sounds, they shot beams of purple energy his way.

Tony lost himself to the aerial fight. Dodge, fire, dive, repeat. Terse orders to Friday. The audio link to his teammates sitting muted and unused in the bottom corner of his HUD. This was his element—working alone for a common objective. They’d only hamper him, split his attention, and he’d just distract them.

About half the Daavi were down before he absorbed a hit from the purple things.

It slammed into him so hard he blacked out for a second.

Tony woke to Friday blasting an alarm in his helmet and the world spinning around him.

His heart jackhammered back to life and he flailed, instinct and practice alone saving him from a brutal death as *pancake* on the ground.

Ears ringing, vision still settling back to normal, Tony managed to bring himself to a hover.

He was *two miles* from the base.

“Note to self,” he growled, firing his thrusters and shooting back up at the phalanx of Daavi in the sky above the base. “Don’t get hit by those damn things.”

“It’s some kind of energy weapon,” Friday said. “The signature is somewhat similar to that given off by weapons powered by the Tesseract.”

Tony frowned. Neared the army. Tesseract weapons had been blue and looked different.
That could just be the result of this being a whole other alien species, not the Chitauri anymore.

He filed that away to think about later and started firing again.

That was when Sharon started screaming.
Chapter 162

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Classified Location], Alaska, United States

April 2012

Clint’s hands tightened on his bow.

The hangar was unguarded.

Such a low— Loki’s voice said in his head.

Clint and Pietro flinched in unison.

Do not fear, I am not reading your thoughts, merely projecting my own. This came with a definite tinge of amusement. Clint scowled at Loki and kept looking around at the cavernous space below them, seemingly hollowed out of the glacier and half-full of alien… things. Probably aircraft or land vehicles or some weird ice-swimming shit. He wouldn’t even be surprised at this point.

As I was saying. Such a low guard presence indicates they do not fear interruption, Loki continued. Or infiltration.

Pietro’s hands were convulsively snapping in and out of fists. Clint wanted to make him stop but honestly he was wound just as tightly; he just had more practice controlling it than the kid. “I can do a circuit,” Pietro whispered. “Check out the perimeter of this room. I won’t go any farther— promise.”

Clint and Loki shared a glance.

“Go,” Clint said.

Pietro was off.

Useful, Loki said.

They made their way silently down four levels of the hollow cylindrical cavern. The paths between the levels were smooth-sloped and just on the edge between awkwardly and impossibly steep for a human.

Clint paused. It had been almost five minutes. “He should’ve been back by now.”

Loki frowned. Agreed. I like this not.

“What are you, Yoda?” Clint muttered.

Loki smirked. ‘Wise’ is not typically an adjective applied to me.

Clint shot him the finger and nocked an arrow.

They proceeded down the inside of the hangar.
Clint’s unease grew with every step. Pietro really should’ve been back by now. It didn’t help that the whole design of the place screamed not built by humans. He normally worked alone—in fact, he preferred it—but he couldn’t deny that it was reassuring to have Loki there.

Loki stopped.

Clint’s grip tightened and the pace of his constant scanning increased but he saw nothing new. “What?” he hissed.

“We’ve been discovered,” Loki said tersely. “Another mage. Not particularly powerful, but wily.”

Clint took the fact that he was speaking aloud as a sign that all Loki’s magic was tied up in the other mage, which wasn’t good. “Can I help?”

“Cast an extremely complex seventh-tier warding spell on the force of your will while carrying on an irritating conversation and also peeling apart the enemy mage’s wards.”

“So that’s a no.” Clint looked down. “Can you move?”

“I must. Proximity lessens the energy expended to include you in my wards.”

“You’re too kind,” Clint said. “I’ll cover you, let’s go.”

Two levels farther down. Three. Loki was silent and no less graceful than usual, but definitely tense, his lips pressed into a thin line. Clint looked back at him once and saw some of the vicious inhuman cruelty that Loki kept so carefully hidden coming to the surface. It reminded him of New York, and unnerved him even more, so he stopped looking.

Five levels down.

Clint felt a shift in the air.

His bow snapped up and he fired.

Pietro appeared in front of him, sweaty and pale and holding his quarrel. “Really?” he snapped.

“Shit—” Clint scrambled for the controller on his bow, disabling the explosive tip seconds before it detonated. He dragged Pietro into an alcove. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Running. Nonstop. For forty minutes. I need food,” Pietro said. He was gray-faced and didn’t look too steady on his feet.

Clint dug a protein bar out of his suit and passed it over. “Didn’t Tony stick calorie packs in there?”

“Ay em ah,” Pietro said around a mouthful of food.

“That’s disgusting.” Clint kept his head on a swivel and his voice low. “Do you have a reason for taking off like that? We thought you’d died.”

A hint of Pietro’s old swagger returned. “They’d have to catch me first.”

“Yes, we know, you’re fast. Moving on. Reasons. Give ‘em to me.”

“There was a door,” Pietro said. “Locked somehow. I was at normal speed trying to figure out how it opened when it started coming open from the other side. I blurred back and forth. Two—Daavi, creepy as anything—came out and headed down. I went inside before it closed and ran around doing
reconnaissance, but then I got trapped and—those things—"

“Breathe,” Clint said. The kid was obviously freaked out. Loki was silent and clearly not paying them much attention. Which left him more or less in charge of deciding whether to press on or stay. “You’re fine. Can you sit down later and give us a decent assessment of their numbers, their capabilities?”

Pietro took a huge breath. “Yes.”

“Okay.” Clint gave himself five seconds to make a choice.

_We’re pulling back_, he decided, and was opening his mouth to say so when Loki hissed “Got you” and fell to his knees as an explosion shook the cavern.

Clint struggled to his feet. Dust choked the air. The supports of the walkway above them were groaning ominously.

A screech of metal made his head snap up. One of the alien aircraft had come loose from its moorings; it crashed into the wall across from them and then caromed straight for them—

The world stretched and blurred.

Clint found himself standing three levels above.

Before he could blink, Pietro and Loki appeared next to him, both looking exhausted.

“Loki?”

“They had five mages,” Loki said, vicious satisfaction still twisting his face. “That number is now down to zero, but I recommend we move.”

“There’s an army down there,” Pietro gasped. He was really not looking too hot. “I can’t—I need a few minutes.”

Screeches came from below, high-pitched and painful.

Clint leaned over the railing. A swarm of wildly inconsistent figures was rising rapidly toward them. A concerning number were airborne, coming straight up the center of the cavern.

“Go!” he shouted, and started raining arrows.

Some part of him relaxed a little now that the threat was in the open. He’d gotten comfortable skulking in shadows thanks to Natasha, but Clint would always prefer to either watch from a remove or engage the enemy fully.


Two-thirds of a quiver left.

He retreated steadily, firing with mechanical precision. Pietro and Loki went before him. Clint heard Loki’s voice right about the time some of the nearest Daavi, mostly the creepiest little shits who proved irritatingly durable despite multiple arrow wounds. He quickly figured out that most of them tended to have a nerve center or something, and got pretty good pretty fast at guessing where it was on each alien, but sometimes it was harder than others. The fact that Loki’s targets just went down with none of the Asgardian’s usual creative killing spoke volumes about his exhaustion.

“Do it.” Clint aimed. Fired. Again, again. “Get to the jet. I’ll be fine.”

“Are you—”

“Go!” he snapped. Fired an explosive arrow. Three Daavi were torn to multicolored pieces. Clint’s stomach turned.

Air drafted over the back of his neck and he knew they’d gone.

It was all Clint needed.

Just as the first Daavi raced up onto his level, Clint hit a button on his bow, nocked an arrow, and launched himself out into the center of the cavern with all the strength he had.

For two heart-stopping seconds, he was in freefall.

Twisting in slow motion.

Drawing back the string. Aiming as he dropped.

Flying Daavi coming closer and closer.

He fired.

The arrow streaked away from him, trailing high-tensile cable the width of fishing wire from his quiver and torso harness—Tony’s latest contribution to Clint’s arsenal. He braced himself.

The arrow hit its mark in the underside of the still-open hangar entrance far above.

Clint’s weight hit his body like a truck. He’d be sore as hell tomorrow, but alive.

As the tiny arc-reactor-powered engine in his quiver whirred, yanking him up toward the ceiling like Batman only cooler, Clint kept firing down below, taking down one airborne Daavi after another. There were a few of the fast-moving kind streaking up the paths in the walls but Clint reverse engineered their routes and blocked them with a few strategically placed explosive arrows. The Daavi were all screaming or hooting or clacking or something with rage. The cacophony battered his ears; blood dripped from his nose.

As he neared the underside of the hangar, Clint fired another grappling arrow to the side and detached from the first one as the second began to reel him in. He swung over, caught the edge of the walkway at high velocity, and dragged himself over just in time.

His entire body hurt.

Clint released the second cable, vaulted up onto the hangar’s open circle, and from there onto the tundra.

The jet was already there, turning to land. Loki and Pietro were at the base of the ramp.

Clint took off after them at a jog.

He was halfway up the ramp before he registered the worry on Pietro’s face, the lines on Loki’s, and the conspicuous absence of anyone named Bruce Banner from the cockpit.
“Friday?” he said, already knowing what he’d hear.

“One of the Daavi hit him with some kind of toxin in human form,” Friday said. The ramp was already closing. Clint shucked off his quiver and ran for the pilot’s seat. “He’s in his Hulk form, but has no rationality whatsoever. And last I checked, he’s heading straight for Anchorage.”

Clint bit back a torrent of swear words so he wouldn’t worsen Pietro’s very obvious burgeoning panic. “Grab food and strap in,” he said instead, flicking switches, going to manual, and firing the thrusters. “It’s gonna be a rough ride.”

The jet lifted off the tundra and roared away to the south fast enough that gravity tugged Clint’s cheeks back and sent his stomach swooping.

[Classified Location], Quebec Province, Canada

April 2012

The situation wasn’t good.

Half their ammo was gone. Steve’s arm was only semi-functional after it had been doused in slime; they’d found a bathroom and washed it off, but the skin was still red and it gave him a significant amount of pain to use. Natasha had already dislocated her fingers twice and was sporting a rapidly swelling black eye. Bucky was doing the best of them, but he’d accumulated a range of skin irritations, cramps, bruises, and aches from every encounter with the Daavi.

Creepy little shits.

There’d been no word from Sam. They didn’t know whether comms were down or he was.

All three of them had excellent spatial memories, but every time they headed for an exit they found it too heavily guarded.

Bucky was starting to get concerned.

That was when Natasha saw the logo.

“Steve,” she hissed, drawing him up the hallway toward her and Bucky.

The three of them stared at it for a second.

“This was a SHIELD facility,” Steve said grimly, voice low.

Natasha nodded.

“They probably know of it because of Fury,” Bucky said. “Does that mean he’s here?”

Natasha’s fingers twitched toward the knife coated in Daavit poison. She’d tied it to her holster in such a way that it only touched metal—apparently the acid only worked on fabric and skin.

Steve frowned. “If he is, he’s about to have a very bad day.”

“We are having a bad day,” Bucky pointed out.
Steve’s entire body was tense as a board. He was definitely in more pain from that arm than he’d admitted. “If Fury’s here, we need to take him out.”

“You can barely use your left arm,” Natasha said flatly. “Trust me when I say I’ve got a better claim to his life than you, but this is not the time for a suicide mission.”

“It’s not suicide—” he argued.

“Yes it is.” Bucky knew Steve’s recklessness from his memories, most of which—pre-the-fall—had come back. And he knew from the files and stories that his friend had gotten even worse after Bucky “died”. Case in point: melodramatically crashing a jet packed full of explosives into an ice field. “If there’s actually no way out of here, we can try to take Fury out with us. But we’re not at that point yet.”

“Aren’t we? Every exit we’ve tried has been blocked by at least a hundred Daavi,” Steve said. “Which you are convinced we wouldn’t be able to fight.”

“Correctly,” Natasha muttered. “And we’re not stuck. Not if this is a SHIELD facility.” She grinned wolfishly. “They invariably have escape pods on the lowest levels. By this point, they definitely know we’re here; the guards on the exits prove that. But it means their numbers will be weak the farther down we go.”

“And this is the first logo we’ve seen…” Bucky murmured. “Clearly, they’ve made an effort to destroy any trace of the SHIELD tie.”

“So they won’t expect us to go searching for escape pods in the basement,” Natasha finished.

Steve slumped against the wall. “You’ve made your point. Do you know where the pods are?”

“Not exactly,” Natasha said. “I’ve never been to this exact facility before, but I’ve seen plenty like it. I can find them.”

Bucky set his jaw. “Let’s go.”

Their time was running out.

Steve’s arm was getting worse.

In the five staircases, two elevator shafts, and seventy-three minutes they’d been slowly infiltrating the old SHIELD facility, Bucky had noticed the redness creeping up toward Steve’s shoulder—his entire arm was bare from where Natasha had cut away the contaminated cloth. His fingers were beginning to swell and he favored his right arm more and more for climbing and carrying weapons.

Neither Bucky nor Natasha said a word, though their silent communication conveyed that they both saw the problem, and were worried.

“I need a rest,” Bucky said.

Steve glared at him in a way that said he knew perfectly well Bucky was fine and only stopping for Steve’s benefit, but didn’t protest, which was another worrying sign. He’d never taken well to concessions.

“How much farther?” he said. “Can you guess?”
Natasha shrugged. “Not much. This—storage, the types of jobs I’ve seen missed signs for—this is the sort of level that’s usually near the bottom of underground facilities.”

*Good.* Bucky wasn’t entirely sure how much longer Steve would be able to stay upright. And if the redness spread past his shoulder—

Tony could replace an arm, but probably not a torso.

He opened his mouth.

“*Honored guests.*”

Steve’s face darkened. Natasha’s turned cold. The voice on the PA system was Fury’s.

Sarcastic, drawling, arrogant. “*Black Widow, Captain America, and… Ryan Dessen. I’m flattered.*”

“He’s trying to draw us out,” Natasha hissed. Bucky knew the effort it was costing her to stay still and not take off after one of the men she hated most. “We have to keep moving.”

His voice followed them down the hall. “*Bit of a demotion for you be crawling around like rats in my house. Sure you won’t consider coming to work for me instead?*”

Bucky did his best to tune out the voice.

“It’s actually ironic that you’re here,” Fury said. “Seeing as I’ve got another guest this week. Someone who hates the Avengers just as much as I do. Seems like you never realized exactly what kinds of enemies you make in this game.”

“That’s ominous,” Steve muttered.

Natasha squinted down the hall. “I think I know where we are…”

“This particular enemy turned out to be very useful to me. So useful that he told me one of your closest secrets.”

Bucky felt sick to his stomach.

“*Longing.*”

Steve frowned. “What—”

Bucky shook his head. *No. No. Not this again.* No.

“*Rusted.*”

“No,” Natasha said. She grabbed his face between her hands. “*No. Stay with me.*”

“*Furnace. Daybreak.*”

The woman rose onto her tiptoes and kissed him.

He kissed her back.

He couldn’t help it.

“*Seventeen.*”
His brain was spaghetti. Nothing made sense.

“Benign.”

His eyes were open and he was kissing a woman and he loved her so much it hurt, or someone like her, there was unfathomable sadness in her eyes as she pulled away that he couldn’t understand, there was a blond man in the corner—

“Nine.”

—a blond man with a shield in black tactical gear carrying a shield, with an injured arm, and half of him howled enemy while the other screamed friend, and where was he what was he doing here why did he feel so compelled to hurt these people who were so obviously comfortable with him, the woman was holding him, the man had stepped closer and rested his whole arm on his shoulder, his cold shoulder, he had a missing arm, and why did this false one feel so light, why wasn’t it silver and plated and oh God no but he didn’t know what he was resisting—

“Homecoming.”

That voice. The voice, the words. All wrong. All right. He had to listen to the voice with the words.

“One.”

He tore away. The woman reached for him, shouting a word—winter—in a language he knew. He lifted a gun and aimed it at the blond man because he was injured, he’d be slow, his shield was secured to his back not ready to use, and the woman clearly wouldn’t sacrifice him. He backed away from them.

“Freight car.”

Half of him wanted to kill these people. The other half wanted to save them. Half of him saw them and thought enemy, considered them evil, obstacles to his objective, screamed at him to kill them and then find the voice, his master. The other half saw them and thought family, considered them great in the old sense of the word, people who had his back no matter what, told him to fight an enemy he couldn’t see and stay here even though everything in him said the voice was good.

He was a battleground.

He didn’t know anything.

Remember anything.

He heard pounding feet and strange noises through a door to his left, getting closer.

His face felt strange. There should be a mask on it, holding his jaw shut, and goggles over his eyes. But there was neither.

He backed farther away.

“Zima,” the woman said.

“Bucky,” the man added, pleading, reaching out to him.

He fired the gun.

Turned and ran.
Just as a horde of twisted monsters poured out into the hallway.

Chapter End Notes

Two for the price of one!
(I got really excited about posting that bit from Bucky’s POV.)
Chapter 163

[Classified Location], Central Mexico

April 2012

This wasn’t possible. This wasn’t possible.

But she was doing it anyway.

“Go.” Wanda gritted out, and Maria took off running, blood washing down one side of her face, carrying Sharon’s unconscious body.

The ceiling groaned ominously.

It had been a five-minute walk from the entrance point Vision found in the hills to where they were now, on the way in. Which meant Wanda had to hold the ceiling up for double that to buy Maria enough time to get back out. At least they’d gotten a decent idea of the numbers and layout of this facility, thanks to their spying and Vision’s.

Her hands were up with fingers splayed and palms facing the ceiling. The red glow of her power gleamed along the cracks in the ceiling. Wanda still didn’t know what they’d been hit with. Or when they’d been detected while they were creeping around.

“—anda!” Tony’s voice crackled into her earpiece. “Jammer’s down—what’s happening?”

“They hit Sharon with something purple,” Wanda said, and gasped. The ceiling buckled. She shoved harder. It held. “They’re heading for—the exit.”

“Vision?”

There was no response.

“I’m sending the jet to the tunnel exit,” Tony said grimly.

Six more minutes.

“Earth to Wanda. Where are you?”

Wanda didn’t respond.

“Holding up the ceiling,” Maria said, voice thin but steady. “Something hit us from above on the way out.”

“Oh shit! I thought I blocked that,” Tony said. “Wanda—” Something exploded. “Oh excuse you, creepy alien, were you trying to kill me?—sorry. Wanda. How are you getting out?”

There was a sound coming from her left.

Wanda looked.

“Shit—gotta handle this—” Tony cut out with another curse.

Three Daavi. Three, she could take, if she weren’t supporting several hundred tonnes of rock and
steel.

Inspiration hit.

Wanda twisted her left hand and crooked her pinky finger.

A massive chunk of concrete fell from the ceiling onto where the Daavi stood.

Screeching and chittering came from farther down the tunnel.

“They’re immune to my power,” she gasped. “Can’t feel them. But I can drop the ceiling on their army.”

Vision phased up out of the floor.

Wanda almost dumped the ceiling on him.

“Wanda,” Vision said. “My comms device was broken. I can carry you—”

“No,” she gasped. “Lead—lead their army here. As many as you can in the next… four minutes.”

Vision gave her a searching look. She kept herself from getting lost in his yellow-golden eyes.

“As you say,” he said, and took off back down the way they’d come in his eerie, soundless flight.

The angry alien sounds doubled.

Wanda slowly began backing down the long tunnel, following Maria’s bloody footsteps. She could barely spare the attention it took to keep herself upright and balanced.

Vision was shouting something.

Her ears were ringing.

Loki’s words replayed in her head. You can either let that guilt destroy you, or you can train so it never happens again.

She clenched her jaw and pushed upward harder. She was in control. This was what she’d been working for. I will not fail again.

“Wanda!” Vision shouted. “They are coming!”

“Bastards,” she whispered, glaring in his direction. “Come and get it.”

There was Vision, flying right toward her. And behind him, a horde of terrifying, perverse, weirdly fascinating creatures. Parasites. Monsters.

Wanda readied herself.

Vision crashed into her.

She let go. Carefully, carefully.

In a wave, the ceiling collapsed behind them, as Wanda let go her power as Vision carried her down the hall. She was pinned against his chest, cool hands solid around her back, looking over his shoulder with both her own hands still upraised.
No fear. No guilt. Only her power, pouring out of her, and Loki was right, as soon as she believed she could control it, the control was there. That simply. That perfectly.

It was beautiful.

They burst out into the daylight.

Wanda was on the ground, bleary. There was Maria, the blood on her face now partially dried.

Someone’s hands at her head. Vision. Tearing out her earpiece.

Wanda reached for it, but he was too quick.

Then he had the earpiece up and he was speaking into it. Rapidly, desperately. About a weapon and how Tony was in grave danger.

Wanda wanted to listen. To help.

But she was so tired. Too tired to do anything except blink at the obscenely blue sky.

_I did it._


_[Classified Location], Central Mexico_

_April 2012_

“Tony. This is Vision. They have a weapon that tracks brain activity,” Vision said. “My presence seems to generate a shielding effect but you are outside its range.”

Tony blasted another Daavi out of the sky. “They’ve got soldiers up here, they won’t—”

“There are tens of thousands more,” Vision said. “They will sacrifice these few. You _must_ leave.”

“Get on the jet first,” Tony insisted. He could handle a single rocket, even if it was brain-wave-seeking.

“It’s coming,” Maria said. “But Tony, you need to get out of there. If they target you with that thing ___”

“I’ll shoot it down. _Go._”

Two more. With _flaming wings_. Tony wanted one.

An alien latched onto his leg. Hissing reached his ears and he looked down—some kind of corrosive was eating its way into his armor. He yelled and shot it off. Spiraled up, launched a few flares, swung down and left in the confusion and took out two more Daavi.

There was a roar from down below.

He looked.

_Holy shit, that’s huge._
The missile wasn’t a little SAM. This was a full-on military-grade jet rocket. Aimed at him.

“Friday, get the missile defense system online,” he said.

“On it.”

A few of the Daavi were scattering.

“Try the electromagnetic shielding,” he said suddenly. “Maybe that’ll block my signal.”

“Electromagnetic shields online.” Tony saw nothing, but his HUD put a purple sheen around its edges.

He frowned.

“Gimme a closer look at that thing. It doesn’t look like it’s targeting.”

He would know. He’d made billions inventing this kind of shit.

Trajectories and angles flashed across his HUD in blue.

“Calculating missile target.”

Tony held as still as he could. The Daavi weren’t bugging him. Friday and his suit systems needed a stable viewpoint.

It fired.

“Friday, finish that math!” he shouted, already diving after it.

“Missile defense systems have sustained damage. Operating at thirty-four percent capacity. Missile target: La Corroza, population nine hundred seventy-six.”

“Fuck,” Tony said, and fired his thrusters.

The missile launched. It was easily longer than he was tall, and even with his suit, it probably had the mass advantage.

“Tony—” Vision began.

“It’s got the brain activity of the market,” Tony said roughly. “Get the others on the jet, Vision, before you come back for me.”

He cut off comms before they could answer. “Friday, activate distress beacon.”

“Activated.”

The missile grew in Tony’s HUD.

The town got close enough for blue lines to highlight it, pulsing gently.

Warning lights cascaded down his field of vision.

He pushed his suit to the max.

And finally, finally, he caught up to the missile.
The town was growing rapidly.

With a grunt, Tony gave the missile a reverse bear hug with a horrible sense of déjà vu. Explosions, desert, rocket on his back—two of his worst memories, both coming back at him.

No choice.

At least if he died, he’d find out what came after this life, if anything.

And hopefully see Pepper again.

Not that he wanted to die.

The missile resisted his course corrections. Tony punched a hole in it where Friday told him the guidance systems were. It shuddered. The resistance lessened.

Turning. Turning. He had to get the town outside this thing’s blast radius.

They were almost to the ground when Tony kicked the missile away from him and streaked back toward the sky.

Seconds later, a massive explosion hurled him through the air for the second time, and despite the siren in his helmet and the wildly spinning horizons, he couldn’t quite manage to stay awake.
En Route to Anchorage, Alaska, United States

April 2012

The jet banked hard enough that Loki almost lost his balance.

He was only just starting to recover from dueling five mages at once. The extra two probably responded to a summons and voidwalked to the Daavi stronghold when the first three realized the strength of the mage they were fighting.

Even exhausted and reeling, he’d been exhilarated. It had been far too long since he’d trained his seidr with the other mages in Odin’s employ, far too long since he was able to test himself in this manner, and not only had it been a fantastic challenge, he’d killed all five of them and certainly struck Thanos a significant blow. There weren’t many mages in existence, and especially not of the caliber he’d just eliminated.

Even the knowledge that they were chasing a rabid rage-blind Hulk couldn’t tarnish his victory.


Loki blinked at him. “Yes?”

“Did you not hear me?”

Pietro shook his head. He still looked ill but he’d eaten seven of the energy-dense food supplements Tony had created for him, which seemed to have steadied him somewhat. “He’s totally spaced out.”

“I am not,” Loki said.

“We’ve been talking for fifteen minutes and you didn’t hear a word,” Pietro retorted.

Loki bared his teeth in Pietro’s direction. “You’ve gotten brave, boy.”

Pietro paled but didn’t look away.

“Okay, seriously, we have bigger problems than Zippy pushing your buttons,” Clint said. “Get your ass up here.”

Loki pulled himself to his feet. His muscles were still buzzing; the mental toll of such an intense mage battle spilled over into physiological side effects, and he felt vaguely unmoored. It was an effort to concentrate on the screen Clint was showing him.

“It has caused significant damage,” he remarked.

Clint hissed through his teeth and banked the jet again. They were circling over the city. “That apathy does not say good things about your mental state.”

Loki knew, when Clint looked at him, that he saw the madness he usually kept so carefully contained. The archer flinched just slightly and looked back down. “Message received, you’re
unstable.”

Pietro appeared on Clint’s other side. “Should I be worried?”

“I’m never stable,” Loki said, and smiled at him, bright and mocking. “I’m simply too tired to put on a façade at this moment.”

“I hate to admit it but I can’t do jack shit against this,” Clint said grimly, ignoring them.

Loki looked at the screen again.

They’d managed to find the Hulk, raging through an office building in downtown Anchorage. Screaming throngs of mortals flooded the streets below, looking like insects from this height even though the cameras on the jet were zooming in.

“Except maybe draw him off from the jet,” Clint added. “But the pilots who’ve tried that in the past all died or got their planes wrecked in like ten seconds, so I’m not sure I can lead him out of the city —”

“I shall handle it,” Loki said, already moving. He knew he had little seidr left in reserve at this moment, and shouldn’t voidwalk even the short distance between the jet and the building by the Hulk, but he found that he did not care.

Clint flipped around. “The last time you went up against the Hulk he left you in a crater in Tony’s floor.”

“I lost that fight deliberately,” Loki said. “So unless you have a superior idea…”

“Pietro, grab him,” Clint said.

Loki vanished.

The world stretched and blurred into shadows. Time and space ceased to matter.

He stepped out of the spaces between all things and onto the street below the tower. His body was buzzing even more. He barely remembered to check his disguise as Ryan Dessen before he raised his arms and laughed at the sky.

“Hulk!” he shouted, voice magically amplified. “Down here, you pea-brained mouldering beast!”

There was an answering roar from above, and then the Hulk slammed into the pavement not far from Loki, looking thoroughly furious.

“At least you’re rational enough to understand an insult!” Loki said, smiling wide enough to hurt his face.

The Hulk roared and charged.

Loki waited until the last second and sprang forward lightly. The Hulk’s massive hand swept through the air with enough force to leave a breeze but he was a fraction of a second too slow. Loki landed on the beast’s shoulder, spun around, and locked his knees around the Hulk’s neck with his hands on the beast’s temples, already hissing the words of a spell.
The beast struck a massive blow to Loki’s back. He felt his ribs crack and ignored the pain.

Another strike, this time to his left hip. The impact shuddered through his pelvis and lower back. Loki gritted his teeth and kept casting.

The Hulk bellowed, spun around, and slammed them both backwards into the building.

They crashed through four walls before skidding across the floor.

Loki’s ears were ringing.

The Hulk climbed to its feet.

He hung on, laughing through his words.

They crashed back out into the street. The Hulk was enraged, thrashing about and striking at Loki over his shoulders. Loki kept on casting, unable to keep a smile off his face even as one savage strike after another landed on his shoulders, back, ribs, hips. This was a fight.

He finished his spell.

The Hulk stopped midstrike.

“I have you,” Loki hissed. He could taste his own blood in his mouth and knew it was staining his teeth, turning his smile ghastly. He focused, overriding the Hulk’s senses and painting a different picture of the world.

The beast would no longer have any awareness of Loki clinging to his back. Instead, he’d see the object of his fury standing in front of him, hear taunting words from just ahead.

With a roar, the Hulk charged at nothing.

A blue flash ahead of them shoved pedestrians out of the way. Pietro, come down to clear a path. Loki concentrated on guiding the monster and let Pietro minimize the collateral damage. The Hulk was enraged, but Loki didn’t let him see or notice any of the cars or light-posts along their way that could be turned into projectile weapons, dulling its awareness of anything except the pursuit. Sensory deprivation didn’t require much power but it was a delicate balance made much easier by proximity. He couldn’t spare any time to think about Clint or Pietro or the people in their way. It took all his remaining willpower and seidr to guide the Hulk between buildings and keep it from causing much more damage to the city.

Four interminable hours later, Loki was jolted out of his exhausted daze when the beast slowed.

The drug must be wearing off.

He’d long ago lost feeling in both his lower legs and even, to a certain degree, his face. Loki had endured worse than this on many occasions, but it was still a relief to know he could let go soon.

Several miles farther on, the Hulk stopped completely.

Loki let his senses return in slow degrees so the overload would not set the beast off again.

It growled angrily.
Loki summoned a bit of his remaining seidr to heal himself enough to move with at least some of his usual coordination and leaped free, landing on a nearby boulder with barely a tremble.

The Hulk snarled at him.

“Banner,” Loki said steadily. “You know me. Think about where you are. Think about who you are. What are we doing in Alaska?”

The Hulk huffed. Looked around. Focused back on him.

It blinked and its eyes softened.

“You are safe. Our mission is complete. We’d like Dr. Banner back now, please.”

The beast almost seemed to sigh before it spun away, tremors wracking its lethal body as it began to shrink into Bruce’s nude form.

Loki wanted to reach out to Clint, but he couldn’t muster up the inclination. Every muscle ached as he slowly lowered himself to the ground, removed his jacket, and tossed it over Bruce’s body. The scientist was curled up on the earth, shivering.

He sat down next to Bruce, tipped his head back against a tree, and waited for Clint to land the jet.

Chapter End Notes

I originally intended to post this segment with another, but the next one is really long and should probably be its own chapter, so this is all for today. Sorry!!

(If I get a lot done today I might post the next bit tonight... we’ll see)
Chapter 165

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Classified Location], Quebec Province, Canada

April 2012

“Zima!”

Zima vanished around the corner.

Half of the Daavi took off after him. The others turned on Natasha and Steve.

She turned and lunged, shoving Steve away, then slammed a metal door shut between them and the army.

Steve lunged past her, reaching for the handle.

Natasha hooked his ankle and twisted, using his weight against him. He missed. Slammed to the ground.

“There’s an army between us and him!” she snapped, dragging him back. “Steve—Steve, we can’t get through there—”

Steve threw her into the door and scrambled to his feet. “I can’t leave him!” he shouted.

She turned on him, feeling loose and unhinged, teeth bared. Steve stepped back, looking unnerved.


Every word hurt.

“What are you talking about?” Steve said. “We can fight them—”

“Not that many, not on our own with you so injured, and if he were helping us I might say yes, but don’t you get it? Bucky’s gone, Steve.” She glared. “We were getting him to balance everything out, getting some of his old memories back, and they just erased Bucky and brought the monster out to play all on its lonesome. He won’t know you. It’s a miracle he didn’t shoot you. This is the hardest thing I’ve ever done but we have to get out of here, and if I can handle that, you can fucking help me save ourselves first.”

She crossed her arms, hiding the tremble in her fingers. The need to go after Zima was a physical ache.

She could bear it. She’d borne worse. Fury had just turned two killing machines loose in his building, one of them confused and ready to shoot anything that moved, the other one steeped in white-hot rage and ready to shoot anything that moved and wasn’t named Steve Rogers.

“Fine,” Steve said. His eyes were wide and wild. “Fine, I just—where to?”

“This way.” Natasha set off without hesitation. Her direction was relatively random but Steve didn’t
need to know that. If she was going to curb his self-sacrificing recklessness, she’d need to give him a direction. A task.

He followed along behind her, both fists clenching and unclenching.

The hallway dead-ended in a stairwell, going down. Natasha glanced at Steve, shrugged, and started descending.

They’d only gone down seventeen steps when she first heard the sounds.

She cocked her head. “Hear that?”

“Sounds like… a beating,” Steve said grimly. He’d gotten some focus back. Good.

Natasha nodded slowly. “Let’s go see who was a naughty child today, hmm?”

The sounds only grew louder, irregular dull thuds, interspersed as they got closer by groans of pain. The person administering the beating kept asking his victim questions, where’s the list, don’t you know what we did to your little girl, your pet scientists, tell me where you hid it, tell us where it is! But the victim remained silent.

They reached a door. Someone had left it ajar. It was iron and rusted and clearly not well maintained.

“Fuck you,” the victim said in a ragged, pain-thinned voice.

Natasha eased the door open.

There was another blow.

“Hell no,” Steve growled, and bulled past her, throwing the door open.

I guess we’re doing this the American way, she groused, following him in. There went all her intentions of sizing up the situation before they went charging in.

Luckily, no one opened up on them with a machine gun. In fact, the beating had continued, its deliverer too focused to notice them.

Natasha and Steve found themselves in a long line of cells, badly lit, damp, and chilled. The beating was being administered farther down.

They exchanged glances and followed the sounds.

Wait, Natasha mouthed at Steve, and peered in through the bars on the door. So horror movie.

A man was crumpled on the floor in the fetal position, back to them, hands tied behind him. The rope was dark with water and Natasha could see sores beneath it. Two Hydra men, guns on their backs, waited against the wall to her left, and a third was standing between them and the man on the floor, alternating between kicks and punches.

Steve and Natasha withdrew. “Enemy of my enemy?” she said.

He shrugged.

They went for it.

Natasha went for the soldiers along the wall while Steve tackled the one who’d been beating the
prisoner. The tall one shouted a warning when he saw her and pulled a knife. She dodged his blow and wrenched him around; his partner’d drawn a pistol but the bullets thudded harmlessly into Tall Guard’s armor. Well, harmlessly to her.

She reached under Tall Guy, grabbed his knife as he dropped it, and threw it over his shoulder. A choked gurgle from the shorter guard told her she’d hit her mark. She shoved her human shield aside. They hit the floor almost at the same time.

Steve stood up behind them. His knuckles were raw. The torturer was moaning on the floor against the back wall.

Natasha walked over to the prisoner and knelt in front of him, lifting his head. “Who are—”

She broke off with a gasp.

Steve swore.

“What—took you—so long?” Phil Coulson gasped.

Natasha tugged him upright. “Phil. How—when—we thought you were dead!”

“I was,” Phil said, wincing. She snapped her fingers at Steve; he ducked around Phil and cut his bindings, then helped hold him up. “I still… don’t know how they brought me back. I remember… dying. Then a hospital bed.”

“How did you end up here?” Natasha said.

“And how long have you been here?” Steve added.

“What month is it?”

Steve shot Natasha a grim look. “April.”

“April…” Phil’s shoulders shook. “Eight months.”

Natasha’s rage was so strong it choked her into silence.

“What happened?” Steve asked.

“It was… a secret that I came back,” Phil said. He was panting but stubbornly hanging on. Natasha went to the guard she’d killed with a knife and started stripping. Phil noticed and began undressing as he talked. “I put together a team. We were working together to find enhanced people… all over the globe. Either… either help them manage their powers, or eliminate the threat they posed to society.”

“What team?” Steve said.

“A… hacker. A girl. Skye. Two scientists—Fitz and Simmons, best friends. An old friend—SHIELD Agent Melinda May. And a rising star, Agent Grant Ward.” Cold fury washed over Phil’s face, reminding Natasha that despite his unassuming demeanor, there was a reason he’d been Fury’s right hand. She tossed him a pair of pants and kept working on the shirt. Coulson had his pants off already and started tugging on the new pair. “Ward was HYDRA. He betrayed all of us. We were coming here for safe haven and supplies after SHIELD fell, but they were waiting—caught Skye, Fitz, and Simmons, then caught me a week later when I came back for them. Fitz and Simmons held out a few months, Skye a bit longer, but…” He shook his head.
“What do they want from you?” Steve said. “And have you seen… who’s leading them?”

Natasha understood his hesitation. If Phil didn’t know about Fury’s betrayal, now wouldn’t be the time to tell him.

But it seemed he was already aware, because his hands fisted. “Yes, I fucking do,” he snarled. “Nick Fury. He comes down to visit once a month. Keeps trying to convince me he’s sorry I have to go through this, and if I’d just tell them what they want it would all be over. Complete bullshit.”

“And what is it they want?” Natasha asked. She finished working off the dead man’s shirt just as Steve helped Coulson get his filthy, sweat-stained, damp, torn one off.

He looked hard at her, then at Steve.

Natasha smiled thinly.

Steve frowned. “Do you not trust us?”

“It’d be just like Hydra to fake a rescue,” Coulson said, peering cannily at both of them. He seemed different—harder, more jaded. Natasha supposed eight months of torture would do that to a person.

“Put this on,” she said, and threw him the new shirt. “You don’t have to tell us anything until you’re ready.”

“Why are you here, then?” Phil said, yanking the shirt on.

Steve explained about the Daavi, about whom Phil knew almost nothing, while Natasha went through the guards’ gear for extra ammo and knives, which she used to replace what she’d lost.

Coulson looked between them. “Assuming this isn’t an elaborate hoax—I can take you to the escape pods. I know this facility—I’ve been here before.”

“Perfect.” Natasha helped him lace a new pair of boots over his feet and pulled him to his feet, ignoring his grimace of pain. “Steve, you’ve got the shield, take point. Phil, give him directions. I’ll keep you upright.” She took a shuddering breath, thinking of Zima. “We’re on a time crunch.”

Phil looked at her strangely, but she ignored him. It was too soon to go into the details of their secret teammates.

Steve led the way out of the cell block, up the stairs, and through fifteen minutes of tense travel in Hydra’s lower levels. It was slow going. Phil was weak, exhausted, and suffering from dozens of wounds both visible and not accumulated over months of brutal torture. But his mind was, incredibly, as sharp as ever, and he guided them unerringly toward the escape pods.

Natasha didn’t let herself appreciate the relief when the pods finally came into sight. They looked like underground jets—sleek, black craft outfitted with Stark cloaking tech and folding wings, ready to be shuttled beneath the earth for ten miles at a hundred and twenty miles an hour, then spat out onto a runway with wings down and already partway to speed. They weren’t designed to travel particularly far, but they could get them home to the Tower, or wherever Zima had gone.

Phil pressed his hand to the scanner. It blinked and turned red. “Looks like Fury learned from that stunt you pulled in the Triskelion,” he said with a resigned grin. “Is there another—”

“Stand back,” Steve said shortly, and threw his shield.
It embedded perfectly in the gap between the door and the fuselage. When he yanked it out, metal groaned, and there was a crescent-shaped hole in the craft. He slid his fingers into the gap, got a grip on the door, and started to pull.

A siren went off.

“Looks like he planned ahead here, too,” Phil said. “I—Romanoff, what are you doing?”

She grinned savagely, up to her elbows in the electrical system. “I’ve learned a thing or two watching Tony. Fury’s little base is about to get its wires crossed.”

Steve grabbed Phil. “That’s Natasha speak for ‘get moving’.”

“I’ve worked with her longer than you,” Phil said. “I speak Natasha fluently.”

“I’m right here, boys.” She shoved them into the hole Steve had torn in the hull. She wanted to smile but couldn’t. Not with Zima out there, alone, and she knew exactly what he was going through. She’d curse herself as ten kinds of a fool later, for not realizing that Bucky’s rehabilitation was incomplete—that even though his own programming hadn’t been as successful as hers, it could still hurt him.

Steve helped Phil sit down while Natasha went immediately for the controls. She’d been taught how to fly these things as part of her training. Likely Phil had as well, but he was far too weak.

She cycled through the engines and the fans, checked the clean power core and the level in the hydrogen fuel tanks—full—and put the cloaking tech on standby mode. Every important function was fully online and she wasn’t going to bother running a full systems check because there was no time.

Natasha bypassed the security code and set the magnetic pulse tracks. “I recommend you sit down and put on your seat belts,” she said grimly. “We’re about to go from zero to one twenty in about seven seconds. Use the G-seats.”

There was a sudden flurry of activity behind her.

Natasha waited an extra couple seconds until the shuffling sounds died before she slid the touch bar all the way up to full power.

Gunshots rippled against the hull.

The electromag track hummed to life. “Hang on.”

With a subsonic thud, they jolted forward.

Natasha’s organs stuck to her spine.

G-forces tugged at her cheeks and her vision blurred, then settled as they approached full speed. It was oddly—not precisely quiet, but certainly more quiet than you’d expect, given what was actually happening.

They were halfway through their journey, according to the screen, when a ripple of force shuddered through the craft.

Natasha grinned.

They burst out of the tunnel onto a runway, hurtling over the asphalt, wings already locked into
place. The controls switched back to manual with a quick, strident beep. She grabbed the joystick, scanned the instruments, and opened up the throttle.

Gravity pressed them back in their seats a second time.

Natasha banked the craft to the right, revealing, ten miles back, a slight depression in an otherwise flat(ish) landscape.

Her headset crackled. Steve’s voice came through a few seconds later. “What did you do?”

She waited until Phil finished fumbling a third headset over his own ears before replying. “Messed with their electrical system. It pays to watch Tony work. They’ve had catastrophic system failures and, by the look of it, some sparks ignited part of their ammunition store. There’s one in every SHIELD facility.” She shook her head. “Such a shame.”

“Not bad,” Phil said. “Wanna explain what you were doing in there, anyway? Since it seems as if just the two of you went up against an army, and I know you’re smarter than that.”

“We were four, originally,” Natasha said tersely. “It was an intel mission but they blocked all the exits; we had to find another way out. We were looking for the pods and found you instead. Speaking of which, Steve, try and raise Sam?”

“On it.”

“I’m calling the Tower, maybe Darcy can find Zima.”

Phil narrowed his eyes at her.

Natasha slid him an unimpressed expression and reached for the radio. Tony had put encrypted channels in the tower’s communication room, which was in his safe room. Hopefully Darcy had the sense to monitor it, since they were no longer in the Quinjet with a direct satellite link to the Tower.

“Hailing Avengers Tower, this is Widow. Come in, Avengers Tower.”

No response.

“Hailing Avengers Tower, this—’

“Got Sam,” Steve said suddenly.

Natasha broke off the dispatch and turned. “Where?”

Steve reached around her, fiddled with the radio. “He’s got his beacon on. There.”

She followed the custom signal and flew as low and slow as the pod could manage—it wasn’t the most graceful of aircraft—waiting for Sam to catch on. “He’s not coming up on comms?”

“Nope.”

Seconds later, the signal overlapped their own blip on the radar, and Natasha heard a thunk from under the hull. “Steve, go let him in?”

Steve was gone in seconds.

She used manual override and unlocked the exterior door nearest Sam, then went back to trying to hail Darcy.
“Sam is Sam Wilson, I presume,” Phil said. “Who’s Zima?”

Natasha’s grip tightened on the throttle. “A friend.”

“I gathered that, funnily enough.”

She isolated her own headset and tried the tower again.

This time, there was a response.

“Natasha?”

“Darcy,” she said, surprised by the strength of her own relief. “Steve, Sam, and I are on an escape pod. We left the encampment severely damaged—they were using an old SHIELD facility that was a Hydra cover-up. We’ve got Phil Coulson with us.”

There was a pause. “Say again?”

“We’re on an—”

“No, I got that part—Phil Coulson?”

“He’s been a prisoner there. It’s a long story,” Natasha said.

Darcy hesitated again. “Can he hear me?”

This is why I like you. “No.”

“Okay, good, because we have a problem,” Darcy said. “The Quinjet took off almost an hour ago and booked it southwest. We thought it was you guys, but then the comms went out and we got worried. I only started checking this line fifteen minutes ago. Where’s Bucky?”

Natasha took a breath. “On the jet.”

“Care to explain?”

“You’ve read my files?”

“I mean, I’m fairly sure they’re missing a lot of shit, but yes.”

“Zima had the same neural programming as I did, activated by a series of keywords,” Natasha said. “Fury found his somehow, played them over the PA system. We thought Zima’s had lost their hold on him completely, and that’s why he was on ice, but apparently there was—still some lingering affect. He—” She took a steadying breath. Found herself confiding in Darcy. “He looked right at me and didn’t know me. He held Steve at gunpoint.”

“Well. Fuck,” Darcy said.

Natasha heard an edge in her voice. “What is it?”

“Hm?”

“You’re not fooling me. What aren’t you saying?”

Darcy sighed. “It wouldn’t matter if he was still rational, but—he’s coming up on the expiration date on his disguise.”
Natasha’s blood ran cold. “How do you know?”

“Remember how Loki and I found out I have a little bit of magic?” Darcy said.

“…yes?”

“I could tell how much power went into the illusion when it was cast. A lot more than I’ll ever have, for one thing. I could sense how long it would last almost as precisely as Loki, and I’d ask him, but he’s currently out of commission because Alaska went to shit, too.”

Natasha would ask about that later. She had other problems and only two questions that mattered. “How much time?”

“Two hours and change.”

“Where did he go?”

“Give me a few minutes, Friday’s working on it,” Darcy said. “He disabled the tracking in the jet, but apparently Tony left an old suit in there as a backup option, and those things have homing beacons. Friday has a remote activation protocol on those so she can send the Iron Legion or the authorities after Tony if he goes down somewhere.”

“Smart.” Natasha looked behind her, found that the hull door was closed and Steve was back in the cockpit signaling the all clear, and banked hard to the southwest. Steve slammed against a bulkhead behind her but she paid him no attention.

One minute ticked by. Two. Four.

“Quebec. He landed outside Quebec not long ago,” Darcy said. “Judging by the infrared readings the satellite’s feeding me—jet engines are still hot. By the time you get there, your fuel will be almost gone and he’ll only have thirty minutes left.”

“Shit.”

“Pretty much.”

“Setting course for Quebec,” Natasha said grimly. “I’ve got a wounded prisoner to deal with and Sam to debrief, and Steve’s not at his most stable right now, so unless there’s something else—”

“No, go handle that,” Darcy said. She sounded distracted. “I’ve got Clint on the other line, anyway—they’re headed back. I’ll have Friday watch this channel and shunt it to my phone if you need me again.”

“Copy.” Natasha broke the connection, turned on the autopilot, and stood up.

“What’s going on here?” Phil asked instantly.

“More than I have time to explain at this second,” Natasha said. “Stay there, please. Steve, come on—we have a problem.”

“And you don’t want to tell me,” Phil said.

She looked at him. “Those trust issues of yours? Two-way street, Coulson. You should know that about me by now.”

He smiled faintly. “Fair enough.”
“If I feel this jet change altitude or course, I’ll assume you’re rerouting us and come up here bullets first, questions second,” she warned.

“Understood.”

She shoved Steve out of the cockpit and down the ladder into the bay of the ship.

“What’s going on?” Steve hissed.

Natasha towed him over to where Sam slumped against the wall, clearly exhausted, half out of his wingsuit.

She reached out and started helping him with the fastenings. “Steve, get his chest plate off. Sam, what happened? We lost contact.”

“My comms unit got fried by some nasty alien shit,” he said, and when he turned his head she saw acid burns along his temple, ear, and neck. “I’m lucky it missed my eyes. I took out the bastards we saw—one of them popped when I hit it, grossest fucking thing I’ve ever seen, and sure enough, it had a bellyful of whitish eggs. The color that makes you think of infected wounds and bad disease, you know? And one of the bastards fractured a couple of my ribs.” He gently rested his hand on his ribcage with a wince. “I killed them all, circled back around, but the facility was on high alert and I couldn’t get in, so I just hid in the trees and did perimeters, picking off all the patrols I found. Is Bucky in the jet?”

“Yes,” Natasha said, and filled him in on what happened.

Sam’s expression got more and more alarmed. “Shit. I mean—” He glanced at Steve, who was pacing and had a wild edge in his eyes still. “I’m not the guy’s biggest fan, but that’s… messed up.”

“He didn’t recognize me,” Natasha said softly.

Sam’s brows furrowed. “We’ll get him back. You rehabbed him once, we can do it again. I’ll bet Loki can pick the commands out once we know to look for them. And didn’t SHIELD cut you off their puppet strings too?”

“It took months and a team of specialists,” she said dully.

“That’ll at least give us an idea of where to start. We’ll make it work, Natasha.”

He seemed so confident. So sure.

“Thanks,” she said, hating the taste of the word, hating, even now, the feeling of letting herself be vulnerable and accept comfort. Even though he was her teammate and her friend, even though he was right. It was still almost impossible for her to let her guard down like this.

But she’d learn. That’s what it meant to have a family of sorts, even a messed-up, dysfunctional, belligerent one like theirs.

“So, to recap,” Sam said. “We’ve got a wounded Phil Coulson in the cockpit, who is somehow back from the dead and has been tortured by Hydra for the last eight months, Bucky’s gone back to crazytown and run off into an actual literal city full of people who will recognize his Ryan Dessen face and definitely recognize the Winter Soldier when his illusion runs out in two-or-a-little-more hours. Oh, and we can’t tell Coulson any of this, because he can’t know about Loki or Bucky. Did I get all that?”
“What about Loki?”

Natasha was on her feet with knives flying before she registered Coulson as the speaker.

Steve dove in front of him, shield up. The two blades clattered harmlessly to the floor.

“You were eavesdropping?” Steve snapped, turning on the shorter man.

Phil didn’t seem phased in the slightest. “I had to make sure you weren’t Hydra.”

Fuck. Of course he’d crept to the top of the ladder and listened; they weren’t keeping their voices particularly low, and he had some of the best intelligence training available on the planet. Natasha wanted to slap herself for the slip. It left her shaken and uncertain in her own skills, and she hated that. She was distracted. She couldn’t let even this distract her, since she was the only close-to-fully-functioning person in this plane right now. She had to keep it together if she was going to get them all out of this.

“He’s not to fault,” she made herself say.

Steve still looked furious, but he backed down.

Natasha slowly retrieved her knives, aware of Phil’s considering gaze.

“You’re working with Loki?”

She nodded.

He waited.

“I was expecting a more severe reaction,” she said slowly.

Phil took his time responding. “I remember dying, Natasha. I remember walking in on two gods fighting in the belly of the helicarrier. I remember Thor backhanding me across the room, I remember the pain of a metal spike jammed through my chest, I remember Loki standing in front of me like a madman and how he jerked himself away, and I definitely remember that his eyes were a nice bright blue. The same color Fury described Hill and Selvig’s eyes turning when Loki first got the Tesseract. I told Fury that, with my dying breath—told him that Loki looked like he was under some form of control as well. I wondered, when I came back, why no one seemed to be aware that that had even been a possibility. Obviously Fury kept it to himself, so I did, too, and pretended to have forgotten those last few minutes. As a… precaution.”

“Bastard,” Steve growled.

“Oohoo, you kiss your—ow—mother with that mouth?” Sam taunted.

“You always find time for jokes when you’ve got semi-untreated broken bones?” Steve fired back.

“Hey, it’s a coping method. Don’t judge,” Sam said.

Natasha ignored them, focused mainly on Phil, who was taking in the obvious rapport between them all with unreadable eyes. It was one of the reasons that even though she liked Phil, she’d never been able to really trust him. She couldn’t read him at all.

“Yes, we’re working with Loki,” Steve added, coming to stand with Natasha. She didn’t have to look to know he’d adopted the kind of uncompromising bearing he adopted when he was climbing onto his principles. “He’s an Avenger now.”
“Is he,” Phil said.

Natasha nodded once.

“And who’s this Zima?” He looked closely at Natasha. “That your old assassin boyfriend, by any chance? Oh, really—you didn’t think I’d put that together, Romanoff?”

“Yes,” she said, and didn’t elaborate. “That’s him.”

“Interesting team you’re putting together.”

“Now that you’ve established we’re not Hydra traitors either, care to inform us about the thing you’ve hidden from them?” she asked.

Phil sat down—slowly. He was obviously in pain. Natasha crossed her arms. Steve shot her a look and went to help Phil sit.

“A list of approximately forty teenagers with known enhanced abilities around the world,” he said bluntly.

“And Hydra wants that so badly?”

“Technology is advancing. The world is changing. There have always been freak accidents that create enhanced people but the rate…” Phil made a motion with his hand, imitating a steep, steep rise. “Skyrocketing. My team and I were mostly focusing on the adults, because in most cases you can get to your twenties or thirties before you have a loss of control big enough to put you on our radar.”

“So how’d you find these kids?” Sam asked.

“Skye made an algorithm—searching news reports and camera footage, but her real genius was getting into the social media. Vine, YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, I don’t even know what else.”

Sam snorted.

“It was still going when we lost… when we lost our plane,” he said. “And the algorithm along with it. Everything she did—gone. It was an explosion. She wouldn’t tell them how she did it, and Fitz and Simmons couldn’t, and they died for this secret.” Phil looked down. “I was trying to die so I wouldn’t tell them, either. The guys who interrogated the others… they were amateurs. Fury rolled in with the real pros two months back. I wasn’t sure I was going to hold out.”

“And Hydra wants the teenagers because younger equals easier to indoctrinate?” Natasha guessed.

“You’d know.”

She didn’t react. Didn’t let herself react.

Steve shot her a questioning look.

“My childhood was less than ideal,” she said, and left it at that.

“So where’s the list?” Sam asked.

Phil grinned. “In my head. And also one other place, but it’s safe there.”
“Where?” Steve said. “We should protect them—”

“I gave it to a friend for safekeeping,” Phil said. “Melinda May, from my team. She escaped—have you heard from her?”

“…no,” Steve said.

“Sharon might have,” Natasha said. “She knows the SHIELD roster better than any of us.”

“We can ask her when we get back,” Steve said.

Natasha nodded. Checked her wristband. “We have an hour and forty minutes left,” she said softly.

Steve winced. “If we can’t find him…”

“What’s the time crunch for?” Phil said.

“Zima… my, ah, ‘assassin boyfriend,’ his face is too recognizable,” Natasha said. “Loki casts illusions on him as a disguise when he goes out on missions but this one’s set to run out of strength in an hour and forty minutes, and Loki can’t help. He was in Alaska with Pietro, Clint, and Bruce.”

“Pietro?” Phil said.

“Someone else explain,” Natasha said. “I have to go fly this thing, or I’m going to start shooting the walls.”

She stalked away from them and scaled the ladder with quick, savage movements.

Steve followed her up a moment later and sat down next to her without a word.

“Fury dies for this,” she said suddenly. Coldly. “For everything else—but especially this. Slowly.”

Steve turned to look at her. Exhaustion tugged lines into his face. “You’re going to do it?”

Natasha bared her teeth. “He’ll regret making an enemy out of me. I’m not wasting mercy on Nick Fury. He’s going to die in the most painful way I can concoct. So don’t get in my way with your mercy, Steve Rogers, when that day comes.”

Steve shook his head slowly, and when he spoke, his voice was as cold as hers. “He’s gone beyond mercy or compassion. Do whatever the hell you want, and I’ll be right there watching.”

She cocked her head and smirked. “We might make a bad guy out of you yet, Rogers.”

She set the pod down on a quiet residential street.

No cars were injured, but she gouged up the pavement. Natasha didn’t give a shit. She checked over her gear one last time and stalked down the ramp.

Steve followed. They’d put his left arm in a sling and wrapped Sam’s torso; judging by the scowl on Steve’s face, he was not happy about the sling. Natasha didn’t care about that either.

“Phil, get some Good Samaritan to call the cops,” she said. There were already people cautiously poking their heads out of doors and windows—it was the middle of the day—to look at the chaos in their neighborhood. She ignored them. “We can’t drag you along with us, and you need medical
attention.”

“What are you going to do?” he said.

“Find Zima,” she said flatly, and walked away.

Steve paused to say something to Phil that she didn’t listen to. Sam was scrambling along on her flank; she didn’t want to bother to slow down for him but she did, just a little.

Steve caught up to them. “Got Darcy on the line?”

Natasha tapped her earpiece. “She and Friday are running facial recognition. She reckons we have half an hour left. Until they find him, we head for the city center. I know him—he’ll be going for a dense mass of people to disappear, find a change of clothes, transportation.”

The boys nodded and fell in without another word. There was a muscle jumping in Steve’s jaw. Sam, she knew, didn’t get along well with Zima, but he was here and resolute because Zima mattered to her and to Sam, and because Zima was part of their family, and she couldn’t help but be cripplingly grateful to him.

They drew a lot of strange looks. Natasha saw cameras going off and dragged Sam and Steve into the alleys and back ways of the city; Darcy left Friday in charge of the facial recognition scans, which were set to scan for both Ryan Dessen and James Barnes’ faces, and used satellite footage to guide them through less-used routes. Between her oversight and Natasha’s own skill set, they managed to lose the civilians. At least Steve’s new suit wasn’t as conspicuous as the red, white, blue, and silver he’d cast aside, and Sam hadn’t worn his wingsuit. He couldn’t fly it well anyway with his ribs busted.

Their time slowly ticked out. One minute passed, then another, then ten more.

The soft alarm on Natasha’s StarkPhone beeped.

“Shit,” Sam muttered.

Natasha nodded, fighting back worry. There was nothing else to say.

They kept moving.


“Tell us,” Steve said tersely.

“Sending it to Sam’s arm screen.”

Sam twisted his wrist and the Steve and Natasha clustered around him to look. He’d left Redwing in the jet with the suit, but kept the interface on for communication.

A security feed appeared of a shopping mall. Cops were converging. People were screaming. And a single familiar finger was running through the mall.

“Zima.”

“Where is this?” Steve demanded.

“Take your next left. It’s like five minutes away.” Darcy was quick, cool, professional, but Natasha could hear the underlying concern. Or maybe that was just her projecting; Darcy was normally
relentlessly self-controlled.

They started running.

The mall was a disaster.

The three of them dove into the fleeing people with elbows flying. Natasha got sick of it, drew a gun, and fired a few shots in the air. People got out of her way after that.

Steve was the first to see him. “Bucky!” he shouted, and started running.

Sam swore again and then he and Natasha were running too. Sam fell behind but this time Natasha didn’t wait.

They found him in a Sephora on the fourth floor. A circle of security guards and cops stood in front of it, shouting with guns out.

“Move!” Natasha shouted, bulling between them. “He’s an innocent!”

They shouted. Slides racked and safeties clicked off.

She stopped between the cops and the store, ignoring the tension. “Steve, go.”

He bolted past her into the store.

“You’re the Black Widow,” one of the guards said. “What the shit—”

“Everyone calm down,” she said, as measuredly as she could. “This is a mistake.”

Some of the cops dropped their guns, some of them transferred their sights to her, and most of them kept aiming at the doors. “What do the Avengers have to do with a local warrant?” one of them demanded.

“He’s… a target of ours,” Natasha said. “The warrant was so local authorities would flush him out of hiding.”

“How’d you get here so fast?”

“We had reports he was in the area. We were already on our way.”

“We’re hearing you discharged a weapon on your way in,” the man in the middle said. Natasha checked out his body language and determined he was a leader, or at least had a badge that gave him authority. “That true?”

“Yes. I fired at the ceiling to move people out of the way. Time is crucial with this particular target,” Natasha said flatly.

“Who is he?”

“That’s classified.”

“Because our warrant says he’s an assassin.”

She was silent.
“Nat!” Steve shouted from inside.

Sam finally arrived.

“I’m needed in there,” she said. “Sam, can you handle this?”

“I’ve got this. Guys, what’s the problem? Whoa, please let’s not point guns at me, I’ve got busted ribs and I don’t feel like adding bullets to that…”

His soothing voice trailed off as Natasha pushed into the Sephora.

Seven terrified employees huddled against the back wall. Steve was standing off to one side of the room, holding open a swinging door and talking softly. Zima must have been in the back room—he’d have been looking for an exit.

“Why haven’t you left yet?” she said to the employees.

A tall Asian woman swallowed hard. “We… no one told us we could?”

_Oh my God. Fucking sheep._

“No, no one told us.”

The speaker stood, dragging up another young woman who appeared to be having some kind of hysteric, and herded her coworkers out of the room. Natasha detected an increase in the volume of whatever proceedings were happening outside this room, decided Sam could handle it, and joined Steve.

Zima had retreated to a supply room. There was an exit there, but he had not taken it, presumably because the door was locked and barricaded behind a well-loaded shelf and clearly had not been used in some time.

“Bucky,” Steve said. “Come on—you know me.”

Zima stared at him. Then looked at Natasha. “I know… her.”

“Yes,” she whispered, stepping closer. “You do.”

“Who are you?”

“Friends,” Steve said.

Zima squeezed his eyes shut. “I don’t—I can’t—aaaahh.”

Steve and Natasha shared a look.

Zima slid down against the wall until he was huddled on the floor, face buried in his knees.

Steve didn’t hesitate. He marched over and sat down next to Zima, wrapped an arm around his friend, and held him as Zima’s entire body started shaking.

Natasha fell to her knees in front of them and wrapped her hands as delicately as she could around Zima’s head, burying her fingers in his brown hair. “It’s me,” she said. “Pauk. Natasha. It’s me. I love you, I love you…” She repeated her own words over and over, a soothing mantra, and when he finally looked up, she cupped his face in her hands.

“Pauk,” he whispered. Recognition flared. He looked to the side. “Steve… No. What did I do?”

“I’m… I’m me,” he said quietly. “I remember before the war, and I remember being your partner, and I remember everything since… since coming off the ice. And…” His eyes turned distant. “Oh no. I—Pauk.” He focused back in on her. “I see them.”

“Who?” she said.

“The—the people I killed.” He closed his eyes tightly. “Some of them. Fragments. It’s… all coming back.”

Natasha glanced at Steve and saw that he understood—something about Fury using the words on Zima had jolted something loose in his brain, and now he remembered more of who he’d been, what he’d done, in his years as the Winter Soldier that didn’t involve Natasha at his side.

Zima kept shaking.

Sam barged into the store. “Okay, I know he’s having a meltdown, but this is getting bad. Steve, Natasha—you’re going to want to handle it. And someone should call Darcy.”

Natasha fumbled for her earpiece and swore a second later. “Comms are jammed.”

“What’s going on?” Steve demanded, standing.

“CSIS is here,” Sam said. “With UN troops and a detachment from the Canadian army reserve. They’ve got orders to bring us in.”

Natasha was on her feet in an instant, and there was Zima behind her, because they’d both been trained to lock away everything except that which was necessary when faced with a fight. “So many interested parties. We’re in high demand.”

“That’s not a good thing,” Steve said.

Zima shifted his feet. “Understatement of the century.”

Natasha looked at him—at his real face—and made a decision. “Are there cameras in here?”

“I shot them out the second I came in,” Zima said.

“Excellent.” Natasha looked at them and lowered her voice. “Steve, Zima and I cannot get caught. The world won’t take it as much of a stretch that we were hunting the Winter Soldier, a famed assassin, and I flipped on the Avengers for him. You and Sam and I were tasked with hunting him since we were in the area, you tried to stop me and I convinced you we’d surrender, then the Soldier and I fought our way out and disappeared.”

Steve shook his head. “You can’t take the fall.”

“We can and we will,” Zima said flatly. He stepped next to Natasha, their arms brushing. “It’s the best way. We’ll find you in New York in a few days. That shawarma place Tony loves so much, three p.m. Have someone there at that time every day for a week.”

Sam grabbed Steve’s arm. “Steve—we really don’t have another choice.”

Steve took a deep breath. Nodded. “As long as you’re safe.”
Natasha gave him a quick, one-sided smirk. “We will be.”

“Come out with your hands up!” someone shouted outside the Sephora with a megaphone.

Steve and Sam exchanged glances, then went to the doors. Natasha heard Steve begin his explanation before they fell shut.

She looked at Zima. “Let’s go.”

They turned and began dragging the shelving away from the exit door.

It made a horrible screeching sound on the floor, but there was no help for it. They worked promptly and ignored the makeup and accessories they scattered across the floor and crushed beneath their combat boots.

Only to find that the door had been welded shut.

“That’s unfortunate,” Natasha said. “Ceiling?”

“No more than six inches of clearance. I checked already.”

Natasha looked at the doors. “Guess we’re doing this the hard way.”

Zima drew two guns and checked their magazines.

She readied her own weapons.

In perfect unison, they crashed through the glass to one side of the storefront, all of which had been blacked out for some decorative purpose, and landed on the aisle with weapons up. Natasha got a frozen snapshot of shocked faces before she started shooting.

These were cops. Soldiers. Normal people, trying to serve their country.

She was the Black Widow, and while she didn’t want to kill them, she would. They fell like chaff before her.

For several seconds, it seemed as if they’d win free through the flanks of the barricade.

Then Natasha felt a prick at her hip. Another on her ribs, and a third in her arm.

She turned to Zima, the world already moving in slow motion.

He had two feathered darts sticking out of his torso, and three more in his legs.

She had time to take in Steve and Sam’s horrified expressions before the world went black.

Chapter End Notes

*chanting* PHIL PHIL PHIL PHIL
“They passed both,” Darcy said grimly.

Tony threw his glass.

It shattered against the counter. No one reprimanded him, which was as good an indication as any that things were bad.

Twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours was as long as everything had needed to go completely to shit. They had a body of one of the Daavi, for God’s sake, that Bruce had managed to capture before he’d been drugged and released on the unsuspecting city of Anchorage. He was still sleeping it off—they’d had to give him sleeping pills, since he was insensate with guilt and anger. Tony ached all over, Sharon was recuperating under Helen and Wanda’s care, since whatever she’d been hit with had scrambled her brain, Maria was battered, Sam, Steve, Natasha, and James were in UN custody, and now this.

“So we’ll be forced to sign the fucking thing?” Clint said. “Not happening.”

“I’m not letting them treat me like a dog to be leashed,” Pietro said.

Darcy dropped her head into her hands. “Bruce’s tantrum… everything’s been passed. The registry, too. They’re listening about the Daavi now, at least, but after the Hulk tore apart downtown Anchorage, they’ve decided it’s just proof we can’t do anything on our own.”

“We need to be more careful with him,” Maria said flatly. “None of us ever considered the potential consequences of Bruce Banner getting hit with a hallucinogen.”

“I can perhaps create a… failsafe,” Loki said. He was sitting on the same couch as Darcy with an arm wrapped around her, and she was curled into his side, a development that Tony normally would’ve commented on but right now overlooked because of other problems.

“I have one in the works,” Tony said. “Bruce’s helping me with it, actually. We named it Veronica. Let’s collaborate. Except, not right now.”

Vision, who’d been dicking around in the kitchen doing something Tony hadn’t bothered to investigate, popped up to ask, “Are we to inform Sharon of the secrets we have been keeping?”

“Bucky Barnes is well and truly out of the bag,” Darcy said. “But a sociopathic alien warlord might be a little harder to explain. Shocking, right? Things are too precarious right now—they’d love an excuse to sweep in here and arrest the rest of us. We can’t risk her blabbing. It’s bad enough Coulson knows.”

“He’ll keep it a secret,” Clint said confidently. Tony could tell Clint was only barely holding it together—Natasha was not the sort of person who reacted well to being locked in a cage. “He’s… a good man.”
“He’s a good man I need to speak with.” Darcy was undeterred. “I’m leaving tomorrow morning.”

“To go… where exactly?” Maria asked.

“Wherever Ross stashed our friends,” Darcy said. “Loki’s coming disguised as my assistant—the nice guy face he’s used before. Maria, you’d be useful, and Tony, you too. Vision, the twins, Bruce, you’re all staying, and Clint, you get to babysit.”

“I’m going,” Clint insisted. “I need to see them.” Natasha in particular, Tony knew.

“You’re staying.” Darcy glared at him. “We need someone who’s not a target for registration here in this building. You also know all Natasha’s bolt holes and I’m betting you’ve got a bunch of your own, which are contacts the others won’t have, so if something goes wrong on our end, you need to get Pietro, Vision, Wanda, Helen, Jane, Sharon, and Bruce to safety.”

Clint blinked. “Responsibility? For me? You shouldn’t have.”

“Probably not, but you’ve got it anyway,” Darcy said, smirking just a little before getting back to business. “Vision and the twins can help with transport if you have to move fast. Just… keep them out of prison, and preferably off the six o’clock news.”

Clint sighed. “Will do.”

Loki tapped his fingers on the arm of the couch. Despite the almost tender way he was holding Darcy, his face was a terrifyingly cold mask. “In the meantime, we ought to review what information we gained yesterday and plan our reaction to the Accords.”

Maria sat forward. “My team got the most intel of anyone. Between Pietro’s report and mine, we have some pretty good insight.”

Tony rubbed his eyes. “Bad news first.”

Maria tapped at her phone. “I’m sending you the estimates of their numbers. We’re ballparking it at six thousand per base. There are nine others around the world.”

Tony opened his eyes. “That’s not actually bad. Drop a couple bombs on their heads, boom, problem solved.”

“They will have planned for this,” Loki said. “Mage shielding against bombs. And I managed to tear some information from the minds of the mages I dueled before I killed them. This is the advance guard, meant to initiate a three-point invasion of North America, situated near the main terrestrial points of attack to this continent. He has a reserve of mages waiting to transport between two and three million more Daavi here as necessary, though they have remained on their home world in the interest of keeping a low profile on Midgard, and saving Thanos from the trouble of transporting supplies.”

“Three million?” Tony snapped.

“Approximately.”

Even Darcy looked slightly sick. “Earth’s armies are going to have serious trouble with that.”

“He’s also used Fury and SHIELD to worm his way into the world’s militaries,” Maria said. “I estimate roughly an eighth to a fifth of the United States navy and air force have been compromised. Fewer of the ground troops. Similar or slightly lower results for most other significant standing armed
forces around the world. Not enough to cause significant problems on their own, except we’ll have a
tough time figuring out who’s who, and it’ll only increase the chaos and uncertainty. I’m sure they’ll
turn on us from inside as soon as the fight with the Daavi begins.”

“If they’re shooting at us, we shoot back,” Clint said darkly.

“Pretty blunt philosophy,” Pietro said.

“It’s kept me alive.” Clint looked at Pietro with an eyebrow raised.

“We’ll win, though,” Maria said. “Even if you assume ten or fifteen normal human soldiers to take
out one Daavit, plus whatever damage the traitors can do, we’ll win, albeit with heavy losses. Why
the invasion?”

“And Thanos will be aware of that,” Loki said. “He did not adequately inform himself before he
invaded… with me, but Fury will have rectified that mistake by now. The only point of the invasion,
then, is… weakening Midgard?”

“Does he have another weapon in reserve?” Tony frowned. “His deal with Fury was that Fury rules
here as regent, kind of, in Thanos’ stead, once Earth’s been conquered. He can’t wipe it out entirely.
Unless he’s planning to betray Fury, which honestly wouldn’t surprise me.”

“We require more information,” Loki said. “I… may have an alternate source.”

Maria stared at him. “What source?”

Loki gave her a vaguely contemptuous look.

She puffed up, ready to fight.

Clint laid a hand on Maria’s arm.

Maria slowly settled back down.

Loki remained unconcerned by the entire thing. Tony was reminded forcefully that Loki could
probably kill everyone in the room except maybe Vision and walk away without a hitch.

“Loki, what would happen if you went head-to-head with Thanos?” Clint said.

There was a loaded pause. Even Vision stopped whatever he was doing in the kitchen to listen.

“I am uncertain,” Loki said. “I was much weakened when last we fought, and… unless he has
another source of power that significantly augments his own reserves, I stand an excellent chance of
victory. If nothing else, I can occupy his attention for a good time.” Tony narrowed his eyes. He
didn’t believe Loki capable of the sacrifice play—of fighting Thanos until he died just to buy the
others time. The Asgardian might fight as long as he could, sure, but he’d have some kind of escape
route. And if it came down to him or the rest of the team—Tony wasn’t actually sure what Loki
would choose. “With Jane and Tony’s device on my side, however, I will have an edge Thanos does
not expect.”

“I really hate to say it, but we’re down four of our combat teammates and we should probably deal
with that first,” Darcy said. “For example, will the UN even let them fight?”

“They wouldn’t be that stupid,” Pietro said. “Right?”

“They were already idiotic enough to put the Winter Soldier and the Black Widow in cages,” Loki
said. “At this point, I would hesitate to assign any kind of strategic intelligence to their credit.”

Tony, impossibly, found himself laughing just slightly.

He almost couldn’t believe he was even capable of laughter right now. The guilt was there, waiting to cripple him. But he hung on to time spent with Sam, to moments like this, of laughter in the middle of uncertainty, to remind himself that the guilt was irrational. That this wasn’t his fault. Or, at least, not fully.

“Maria, Loki in disguise, me, Tony.” Darcy ticked off the four of them on her fingers. “We’re getting picked up from the helipad at six, so do any kind of packing or prep you need tonight. We can… make a plan after we hear more from the UN.”

“Bruce isn’t going to let himself be registered,” Tony said. He and Bruce had talked enough about it, had worked together long enough, that he could speak with a fair amount of confidence as to what Bruce would want. “He’ll go rogue before that happens.”

“And you?” Darcy asked him.

“I won’t get in his way,” Tony said. “And I don’t want to be restricted by the Accords. I’m not signing them.”

“I will.”

They all stared at Maria.

She didn’t look away. “If it’s that or never operate as an Avenger again, I’ll do it.”

“I’d rather be a vigilante,” Clint said. “I’ve spent enough time tied to bureaucrats. I’m done.”

“Hey,” Maria said.

“I was one of those bureaucrats.”

“You were an agent in a bureaucratic position,” Clint corrected. “Working under you was fine. Phil, too. And Fury, before he turned out to be a Hydra traitor. Those United Nations dumbasses? No thanks.”

“I will go with Bruce before I sign the Accords,” Pietro said. “And so will Wanda.”

No one questioned his right to speak for his sister.

Tony glanced at the kitchen. “Vision?”

“Hm?” He looked up, his face the picture of innocence. Tony smelled something sour and decided not to comment.

“Ah—apologies.” Vision paused. “I would prefer not to be considered a vigilante. However, I dislike the prospect of finding myself bound so early in my life to a government entity that has such a poor track record.”

Loki and Darcy shared a glance. Tony wasn’t sure what passed between them.

“Thanks for sharing your thoughts,” Darcy said. “We’ll glean what we can tomorrow and when we come back we can make a game plan.”

“Sounds good,” Maria said.
“I need sleep.” Pietro pinched the bridge of his nose, briefly. “Energy bars can only keep me going so long. Also, Mr. Stark… is there a way to… compress or package water so I can carry it with me and not have to deal with a Camelback-style backpack? The calorie boosters are useful, but I need water, too.”

Tony frowned. His brain felt like Jello and his whole body hurt like hell, but he’d concentrated, and worked, in worse conditions. Case in point: building the prototype Iron Man suit in a cave with a car battery attached to his chest with duct tape and a body that was almost literally made of bruises. “Probably. I’ll see what I can cook up.”

He regretted his choice of words a second later, when there was a bang from the kitchen, and then the smell of something burning.

Vision’s face appeared, looking contrite even though soot or smoke covered it. How he’d managed to do that when even the stovetop was electric and there were no open flames anywhere in the kitchen, Tony had no clue.

“I am sorry,” he said into the silent room. “I had hoped… that preparing food would… help.”

Tony grunted as he levered himself to his feet. “Yeah, we’ll get you cooking lessons sometime. I’ll do, I don’t know, pasta.”

“No you won’t, sit back down, I don’t want food poisoning,” Maria said.

Tony gratefully flopped back onto the couch.

Clint held up his phone. “I ordered pizza. Lots of pizza. Paid extra for fast delivery. It’ll be here in ten.”

“You’re the best,” Darcy said with feeling.

Food. Even Pietro, who’d been hovering near exhaustion, perked up at the prospect of food.

“Food, then sleep,” Clint said. “Busy day tomorrow.”

Darcy closed her eyes and turned her head into Loki’s shoulder. “Someone wake me up when it gets here.”

Clint glanced at them with eyebrows raised, then looked a question at Tony. He shrugged. He had no idea when this had happened, or even what had happened.

Loki smirked at them both.

Maria poked Clint on the shoulder. “Let’s go help clean up the kitchen before the smoke alarms get set off.”

Clint linked their fingers together as they walked into the kitchen.

Tony missed Pepper with a sudden, fierce pain. He didn’t think he’d ever again have what Clint and Maria had, what seemed to be forming between Darcy and Loki, what he’d once had, and lost. *Fury’s fault. Fury and Thanos’ fault.*

And he’d see them die slow, painful deaths for it.
Bit of intermission here. I meant to post it with the next one but i managed to cut the pad of my left index finger almost down to the bone two days ago and typing is not fun, so I haven't actually written anything in the last few days, so I'm trying to slow down my update speed. Sorry for the inconvenience!
They needed more information.

Loki paced around his room for half an hour, preparing himself mentally. His seidr was still weakened and drained, even a day after he’d dueled and defeated Thanos’ mages. It was a good sign that he’d been successful—his time on Midgard had not put him dreadfully out of practice.

But he didn’t know if he’d have enough for what he planned.

The door opened, and Darcy slipped inside.

“What’s our play?” she said.

“I will travel to Thanos,” Loki said simply. “Not worldwalking—my body will remain here. To determine… his plan, if I can. His precise numbers, if I cannot reach his mind or that of anyone close to him, especially the number and strength of the mages loyal to him.”

Darcy narrowed her eyes. But she didn’t try to stop him, tell him it was foolhardy and dangerous, all the things he knew. “I assume you need my help.”

His lips quirked. “I could simply desire your company.”

She leveled a flat stare at him.

Loki conceded. “This sort of spell is rune-based. I pour a set amount of power into runes used to cast it and that is how much seidr I can use to travel and exert limited influence wherever I direct my consciousness. If I were to do it without runes, the likelihood of overextending my power, and dying, is far too great. I need you here to call me back—to watch and ensure I return before my seidr runs out.”

She nodded slowly. “Because I’m the only one in the tower with a sense for that kind of thing.”

“Wanda could serve this purpose as well,” Loki said, choosing his words with care. “Jane… I’m sure she or Tony has something tucked away that could detect the power levels in the room. I trust none of them enough for this.” Only you.

It was a terrifying risk he was taking. He had only performed this spell seven times, and each time, he had a bevy of trained, powerful mages watching his vacant body, all of them utterly loyal to Asgard, all of them aware that the punishment, should anything happen to the younger prince under their care, would be great. He’d trained and worked closely with all those mages. He knew they’d cooperate, and he had the fear of Frigga, Odin, and Thor’s retribution as insurance.

He had none of those assurances here.
Only a newly minted mortal mage, armed with a smidge of power, her wits, and the fact that he trusted her enough to not let him die.

Judging by the glint in Darcy’s eyes, she knew exactly how difficult it was for him to put himself in this position.

“What do I have to do?”

“These runes.” Loki dragged his fingers across the interactive tabletop to wake it, then activated a drawing pad on its surface and drew a series of runes. “They will call me back. I’ll show you how to tell when it is time to do so.”

Darcy studied them. “This is hella complicated. More than anything else I’ve ever done.”

“I know,” Loki said. “I would not ask were I not confident you can cast it.”

This was a risk on her part as well. She was trusting him that her own reserves would be adequate to cast this spell—and if he lied, she would die. She knew enough about magery to determine that as well.

There was no hesitation in her voice when she said, “Okay.”

Loki summoned one of the custom blades he’d worked on with Tony and Clint and sank it into his arm.

Darcy’s nose wrinkled. “Uh, what?”

“Runes drawn in blood are stronger,” Loki explained, and knelt in the center of his living space, which he’d already cleared. He held a simple glass cup beneath his arm and watched the blood drip into it. Only a few errant splashes hit the floor. He ignored them. Whenever the flow began to abate, he squeezed the wound or dug the knife in again, until the glass was full.

Only then did he murmur a superficial healing spell.

Darcy squinted at the still-red skin, the raised scar. It was clearly only partly healed. “You gonna keep that?”

“I’m not wasting any seidr,” Loki said, which was as close as he would come to admitting how low his own power reserves had become.

Darcy bit her lip and he knew she’d read the subtext, but again, she didn’t comment.

He dipped his finger in the glass of his blood and began writing runes around himself in a circle on the floor, pouring seidr into them as he did so. He paused to show Darcy which seven runes contained the power he’d need to return to his own body; she noted how much seidr he put into them and nodded assent. She would draw him back when he had exactly that much power left in his rune-spell.

Loki met her eyes. Smirked. “I’ll be back in time for dinner, love,” he said mockingly, and drew the final rune.

The last physical sensation that reached his mind was of his eyes falling shut over an image of Darcy’s half-laughing, half-outraged face.

Time stretched.
Loki’s consciousness settled, having found its target—he’d bound the spell to the distinct beacon of Thanos’ magic, which Loki knew so intimately. Only when he’d been borne by his *seidr* to wherever Thanos was would he be able to once again perceive the world around him.

It was a strange kind of perception. Untethered by his body, Loki’s *seidr* translated the world around him into experiences his mind could understand that more or less mimicked the function of his sensory organs. He could see, hear, and smell equally well in every direction; it became more difficult to focus on any one thing. Became too easy to simply float in a wash of information and process very little.

He exerted his will over his own sense of self and brought his consciousness to bear on Thanos.

The creature was sitting at a table, working in a holograph—old Muspelheimr technology Loki vaguely recognized. Cheap, and favored by criminals, outcasts, revolutionaries, and fringe cultures throughout the Nine Realms, since it was highly durable and had been stockpiled in many places despite no longer being in production. Loki did not know the language Thanos was working in, but with the help of Allspeak, he was able to decipher an argument among Thanos’ lieutenants about food supply for their Daavi army.

“Lord.”

Loki shifted his focus toward the voice.

“The Daavi generals are fighting again,” the speaker said. A being Loki recognized as one of the Llevar people from a solar system in the vicinity of Alfheim. This one was scarred, old, and branded on the front of their bulbous forehead with the Llevar’s exile mark. A criminal, then.

He pulsed his *seidr*, drawing from his rune-spell, and understood from the Llevar’s mind that there were seventeen generals of warring Daavi tribes, all brought under Thanos’ banner in a peace driven by their mutual goal of expansion, but that fights were common and Thanos had to spend a fair amount of time keeping the Daavi generals in line.

“Send in the Bab-lears to sort them out,” Thanos growled.

Another pulse at the Llevar. Shock filtered slowly through Loki’s consciousness; Thanos had indeed managed to win the loyalty of a unit of Bab-lears, a fearsome mercenary race whose homeworld had been eradicated so long ago that even the Bab-lears’ own scholars couldn’t tell where it had once been.

“They’re half a cycle’s travel away,” said the Llevar. “Unless you use a mage—”

“No, we must conserve our mages,” Thanos said. “How many times must I remind you idiots? We lost five against the Jotun prince; all those remaining are needed for the invasion.”

“Yes, lord.”

Thanos sighed heavily and stood. “This means I have to sort it out myself?”

“Afraid so, lord.”

Thanos growled a swear word and stomped for the door. Every footstep was heavy and laced with menace.

Loki suspected he’d lingered too long. He turned his concentration away from Thanos and reached out into the surrounding environment.
He didn’t know how long he drifted through Thanos’ fortress, only that he was both horrified and awed by what he found.

This wasn’t the Daavi homeworld at all. This was… This was a massive supercity three times the size of Earth, irregularly shaped, made of at least seven dozen races’ technology, spacecraft, and culture. Llevar exiles and outcasts and Bab-lear mercenaries weren’t the least of it. Loki couldn’t fathom how Thanos had brought this host together.

But as he traveled through the drifting supercity, he noted that the non-Daavi occupants were few and far between, and seemed to serve as administrators and leaders. Thanos’ immediate lieutenants and bureaucratic followers. The Daavi were clever in direct combat, tribal warfare, and cruelty, and rather ignorant to most other matters, so Loki supposed it made sense that Thanos relied so heavily on an executive division made of free-thinking, educated outcasts from around the Nine Realms. Cruel, amoral people with nothing to lose and everything to gain by allying themselves with such a powerful figure.

Nothing he saw suggested Thanos possessed a superweapon.

Loki became increasingly curious the more he searched. The Daavi force, while impressive, would eventually be overwhelmed on Midgard, particularly if Asgard sent aid, as he suspected Thor may convince Odin to do eventually. Which meant, as they’d discussed in the penthouse, it could be intended to weaken Earth for another force, yet Loki saw no evidence of one, nor found any mind in the entire supercity who knew of a reserve army.

Which meant there was something else at play here. A diversion, a sleight of hand…

Loki’s time was running out.

He let his spell draw him back to Thanos.

He’d finished upbraiding the Daavi generals, apparently, and was climbing rapidly through his supercity toward its outer edge, where many of the science and engineering personnel were housed. Loki followed, readying himself.

He’d avoided reaching into Thanos’ mind so far, for the simple fact that Thanos was a skilled mage and knew Loki’s seidr as well as Loki knew his, and it made the risk of detection far too great.

But he’d not learned anything vital they did not already know. He hadn’t achieved his purpose here.

And he’d committed himself fully, if unconsciously, to the Avengers’ crusade. He would protect Midgard at least in part because it was being threatened, instead of because Thanos was doing the threatening.

They trusted him.

For once in his life, Loki wondered if… if maybe he could be enough for them. If he’d found a group of people who would not cast him aside on the way to bigger and better. In his whole memory, everyone he’d ever tried to befriend and abandoned him for Thor, for Odin, for the Warriors Three, for battlefield glory and status in the eyes of Asgardian warrior culture. (But mostly Thor.) The Avengers hadn’t.

He wanted to repay that debt—to show them he could be useful for more than killing their foes.

He’d dive into Thanos’ mind then, a subtle and creeping magic, hopefully remain undetected, take what he needed, and return to his body.
Loki readied himself. This would take the most willpower of anything he’d yet attempted while mind-traveling. Every sort of magic was harder as a disembodied mind, and this would be the most difficult task of all.

He reached out.

It was an immense effort to not recoil when he felt Thanos’ consciousness. It was a pattern of thought and belief that was rotten, decaying, sadistic, impulsive, cruel without cause, morbid, and undercut by a strange and perverse fascination with death and dying. Loki knew himself to be a cruel and selfish person, prone to impulsive and reckless behavior, but he was also rational—he was not cruel without cause, checked his impulsive side with centuries of mental discipline so that he could wait and pursue what he wanted over a long term. Thanos… Thanos made no such effort. He killed without reason, delighted in the pain and suffering of those who’d harmed nothing and no one, and everything about him felt wrong on every level to Loki. The touch of his mind brought all Loki’s memories of being bound almost helplessly to this creature through the scepter roaring back.

He fought the tide. He could withstand this. He could overcome this.

He reached farther in. Began accessing Thanos’ memories and plans and intentions, all of which lay in the subconscious, and were extremely difficult to find in an unwilling mind. Loki absorbed all the impressions he could in a short amount of time. He’d carry them back with him, sort through them immediately upon his return, and write them down before they slipped away.

The moment he began to search for a specific thing, he knew Thanos would sense him.

Loki prepared to withdraw.

Thanos’ seidr snapped down around him like a net.

He almost panicked. Only the endless time spent training first with his mother and then with Odin’s mage units kept Loki in control of himself. He’d been discovered. He needed to escape now before Thanos trapped everything he was on this barren false world.

_Jotun traitor_, Thanos said. _I’m impressed you have enough strength left to find me here, after killing five of my mages two Midgard days ago. I really underestimated you._

Loki ignored him, drawing seidr from his runes as quickly as he could.

_You could be much more useful to me as a willing lieutenant than you ever were as a mind-slave_, Thanos said. _You like bargains, right? And betraying. Cast an oath-spell of fealty, and I’ll let you go._

He would not.

Loki prepared to burst his way out of Thanos’ seidr-prison—and hesitated.

Thanos was deliberately sending him an illusion.

_He stood at the head of a legion._

_Monsters, outcasts, exiles, criminals, nightmares come to life—the Realms’ worst people and cruelest fighters, serving Loki Laufeyson as he advanced on Asgard._

_He fought in Asgard’s palace, gifted power from Thanos, dueling Odin and Thor at once. They fell at his feet, and there was Frigga at his side, grieving her husband and son but understanding the man she’d adopted as her own. Following him as he took Asgard’s throne at last._
Sif and the Warriors Three bowing at his feet.

Ruling Asgard as he chose, sending a division of soldiers to Thanos’ side as he conquered the other Realms, training an army of mages sent to him from throughout the galaxies into an unstoppable force unlike anything the Realms had ever seen.

Becoming a king whose name would echo through the strands of time until the universe went dark once more.

Loki was frozen somehow.

You see, I’ll make it worth your while, Thanos said, and somehow the sensation of a leer accompanied the mental communication.

That did it. Loki remembered Thanos leering at him in just the same way once before, right as he brought a whip down on Loki’s back over and over and over, draining him of seidr and willpower until the scepter could take his mind.

He unleashed his seidr in a wave. Punched through Thanos’ prison and fled.

Not fast enough to escape one last taunt.

I know what you truly want, Laufeyson.

Loki drifted.

He couldn’t find the will to focus on anything. He couldn’t do much but float through Thanos’ supercity. There was a distant awareness of a call, a beckoning, almost a pleading tug, and some small part of him wanted to follow it, but it was too hard to concentrate on anything. He had no strength left.

Then seidr hit him like electricity.

Loki snapped back to himself.

This seidr was other. Warmer, weaker than his own. But power was power. And it was enough for him to remember who he was, to focus his detached mind on the call that he realized was Darcy tugging him home, to drag himself back through endless swaths of space and time to a room in a tower in a city on a planet where a woman with cunning eyes and a clever tongue waited for him.

He opened his eyes with a gasp.

“Loki,” Darcy breathed, “Loki,” and her hands were holding his face as he sucked in one breath after another, as he blinked and trembled and reacquainted himself with the concept of having a body.

His eyes finally focused.

“As soon as you stop shaking, I’m going to slap you for scaring me like that,” Darcy said, and then she kissed him full on the mouth, desperately, hungrily.

He responded without thinking, still feeling wild and poorly settled in his own body. This flesh-and-blood container for his mind felt heavy and restricted, as it always did after mind-travel, but it remembered how to kiss just fine.

And it grounded him. Faster than he’d ever come back to himself after mind-travel.
Darcy pulled away, breathing hard.

“Notebook,” Loki said. Words were still foreign to him; he had to remember how to shape them with his vocal cords and lips and tongue.

Fortunately, Darcy was quick to understand. She scrambled to her feet and returned seconds later with a StarkPad keyed up to a note-taking system and a stylus.

Loki grabbed both and started writing. He slipped reflexively back into the runic language of Asgard, rather than English, attempting to get down all his last impressions of Thanos’ mind as quickly as he could.

He left out their conversation. Thanos’ offer. That dreamscape, uncomfortably vivid, undeniably tantalizing.

When he was done, he dropped the stylus with a sigh.

Darcy poked him hard in the chest.

Loki reacted on instinct, grabbing both of her wrists and twisting so that he’d pinned her on the floor with a knee ready to drop into her gut and his other hand ready to summon a blade.

Then he remembered himself.

Darcy smirked at him without a trace of fear in her eyes. “That’s for scaring me. I kinda decided, you know, slapping you would probably be a bit much since I assume you had a good reason for not coming back the first time I called you, but I did have to send you like all of my seidr for you to come back which means I can’t pull the prank I was planning to do to Jane later—”

“How did you send me your seidr?” Loki asked, brows furrowing. He didn’t move, hovering over her but careful not to crush her much smaller frame, savoring the proximity.

Darcy seemed completely relaxed. “I saw the runes you used to put power in your spell you could call on. So I cut my arm and added some of my own. Hurt like a bitch.”

Brilliant. “Thank you,” he said.

Her eyes widened with mocking incredulity. “Ooooh my God, how’d those words taste coming out of your mouth?”

“Not nearly as good as you,” he said, letting his voice drop.

“Well, duh.”

He laughed. Kissed her again.

It was some time before they returned to the information he’d gathered.

He sorted through his notes, translated them to English, and talked to Darcy, putting the pieces together slowly as they sat across from each other on his floor and the stars wheeled by outside his window.

He didn’t know what Thanos’ weapon was, but he had one, and he needed his Daavi armies to occupy the Midgardians long enough for Thanos himself to reach Midgard. Evidently the weapon could not be moved by worldwalking.
“So… we need to take the fight to him?” Darcy said. “Before he gets to the planet, I mean.”

“That would be ideal,” Loki agreed, but he frowned.

“You don’t think we can.”

He traced patterns on Darcy’s knee with his fingers, enjoying the feel of her skin on his and the sight of her sitting cross-legged on his floor wearing nothing but one of his shirts. It hung almost halfway down her thighs and hinted temptingly at the curves of her chest and hips. “I saw his legions, his fortifications, his security systems. I felt the utter confidence he has in his security, and Thanos is many things, but prone to misjudging the ability of his own fortress’ defense is not one of them. I do not think there is a way for the Avengers to get inside and find this weapon, find Thanos, without him knowing. And if we are detected, we’ll never reach him in time.”

“Why not? Can’t you just, I don’t know, steal a ship from somewhere else in the Realms, or worldwalk us all there?” Darcy asked.

“He’ll sense the portal if I open one to worldwalk,” Loki said. “Every inch of that fortress has wards and traps and magical alarms woven into it. And stealing a ship is logistically impossible. Opening a portal wide enough to transport it undamaged would be straining, and preventing any of the mechanical components from being… scrambled… would be more so. Portals are meant for mages. Nonmages are difficult to transport, nonliving things even more so. And even if I managed to get one to Midgard in working order, I’d have to recover my strength, and then we’d be faced with the task of finding Thanos’ mobile fortress, docking, and entering, all without him detecting our arrival. I see no way to accomplish all that successfully.”

Darcy bit her lip. She did that when nervous, or thinking, he’d noticed. It made him want to kiss her. Then again, now that he’d allowed himself to acknowledge it, he rarely didn’t want to kiss her. “You already have a plan, don’t you.”

“You will not like it,” he said.

“Try me.”

He told her.

“I don’t dislike it,” she said. “And I don’t see another way.”

“We cannot inform the rest of the team.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Eh, Natasha—no, you’re right, we should keep this one a secret.”

“I’ll teach you the spells you’ll need. It will require all the interim time before Thanos’ arrival and the initial attack for you to master them.”

“We have… how long?” she asked.

Loki cast his mind back, and glanced over his notes. “I… don’t have an exact time frame. But no more than three weeks.”

“Fuck.”

His lips curved into an involuntary smile—the closest to gentleness he ever came, an expression he only let her see. “An admirably concise summary.”
Darcy nudged him with her foot and stood up. “Okay, it’s late—or early, whatever—and I need to be up in like four hours. Sleep time.”

Loki climbed to his feet, limbs still… foreign and light, somehow, as if they weren’t quite attached to him. The feeling had gone away while Darcy rode him on the floor until he saw stars, but he knew from experience that the aftereffects of mind-travel would linger for the next day or so.

He followed Darcy into his bedroom. They’d spent almost every night together since she finally responded to his advances, in whosever bed they were nearest (or already using for other things) when it came time to sleep. So she knew which pillow she liked best and to make sure his windows were darkened all the way before they settled in.

Loki found himself craving simple touch, a reminder that she was here, that she cared, that he was in his body and in this room and fully present, after mind-traveling. She’d informed him he usually found some way to touch her while they slept, but tonight he wrapped an arm across her body and tangled their legs together beneath the sheets.

They fell asleep with their fingers laced loosely together.

Chapter End Notes

Did I get emotional writing this chapter? Nope, not at all, definitely not even a little bit.
Tony set the phone down with shaking hands.

He gave himself two minutes and a glass of bourbon to get himself under control before he went to find Darcy.

They were leaving in an hour and a half, and he had to talk to her about this before they went anywhere.

But when he knocked on her door, there was no answer.

He frowned. Knocked harder.

Still nothing.

“Friday, where’s Darcy?” he asked.

“She has asked that her location remain private. Shall I inform her you wish to speak with her?” Friday said.

“Uh, yeah.” Tony would’ve laughed if he weren’t so worried. He’d programmed Friday to obey the tower inhabitants’ express wishes for privacy unless they were injured or endangering the others’ lives, mainly because all of them had issues of one kind or another that made them seek privacy and solitude on a regular basis. But times like this he almost regretted it.

He leaned back against her door.

Just within his line of sight along the curving hallway, a door opened and Darcy stepped out, wearing a long green button-down shirt.

Tony had to blink and stare for another few seconds to convince himself that really was Loki’s door.

Darcy closed it behind herself and took two steps before she noticed him standing there.

Tony raised his eyebrows.

She didn’t hesitate for more than half a second. “Something come up?” she asked.

He studied her. Nothing in her manner suggested anything was out of the ordinary, but—the shirt. The door. “You tell me,” he asked, nodding back down the hallway.

Darcy grinned at him, totally un-self-conscious. “I can handle myself, Stark.”

“Yeah, but… that’s a lot to handle.”

“So am I.” She pushed him aside, pressed her hand to the scanner, and opened her door when it blinked green. “Is something actually wrong, or did you wake me up forty minutes early because of insomnia? Which is totally fine, I get it too—”
“Not insomnia,” Tony said. “I just got off the phone with Ross, and then Sabina Prescott, and then the Secretary General of the United Nations.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

He followed Darcy into her rooms and flopped on the sofa. He needed caffeine. “It’s not. He wants Wanda, Pietro, Maria, Vision, ‘Liam Hillworth,’ Clint, and Bruce brought in for questioning about the infiltrations. Maria’s already coming, but the others—if they don’t come, we’ll be arrested—either here or wherever their new headquarters are.”

Darcy winced. “Yeah, that’s bad. Coffee?”

“Did Voodoo Man teach you how to read minds?”

She tossed him an unnerving grin and headed for her Kuerig machine. “What do you think we should do?”

Tony sighed. “Seems like we have two options. We all disappear right now and lose any remaining credibility, or we take the people he’s requested and hope we can sort it out.”

Darcy hummed to herself. “You trust the UN?”

“I trust they have good intentions,” Tony said. “They’re more or less good people who just have a different view of what’s right than we do. If they want to debrief Vision and Wanda and Clint and Bruce… a show of good faith couldn’t hurt.” He paused. “Bruce won’t come, though.”

Loki opened the door and walked in. “I was eavesdropping,” he said unapologetically. “Carry on.”

Tony squinted at him. He hadn’t knocked, meaning Darcy had added Loki’s prints to the keypad outside her door.

“That’s what I was thinking. About Bruce.” Darcy passed him a mug, unperturbed, as Loki sprawled on a chair. Tony decided to roll with it and took a grateful sip. “We can spin something to keep him here.”

Loki angled his head. “Perhaps say he is suffering medical side effects of being hit with a psychosis-inducing toxin while trying to draw the Daavi away from population centers. That will limit their ammunition against him and provide an excuse for him to remain here. And ‘Liam Hillworth’ could also be too ill to travel. I am using my guise as your assistant, who is not likely to be arrested.”

“What’s that fake identity named?” Tony asked.

“Shawn Batton.”

“Yeah… They requested Clint,” Tony said, recovering his earlier thought. “Which is a good sign—if they were only asking for the enhanced members of our team, I’d be worried. Pietro we can also say is injured, and because of his enhancements, travel is too dangerous for him.”

Darcy was writing a list. “So—we add Clint, Wanda, and Vision to our field trip?”

Tony stared at the table. He was too tired and fuzzy to think straight, and the caffeine hadn’t kicked in yet. He really needed to sleep more. He couldn’t remember the last time he got more than five hours of sleep in any given twenty-four-hour period.

“I’m hesitant to trust them,” he said. “But I want to.”
“Yeah,” Darcy said. “Same. I… you really think we can go with this?”

“None of them was present with the group in Canada,” Loki said. “While I’m sure Ross would love to imprison Clint as leverage against Natasha’s escape, my impression is that he needs an actual crime to do so.”

“Due cause,” Tony said. “Lovely little concept. You agree, then?”

“I agree that everything I know about the structure of your governing bodies on Midgard prevents them from imprisoning citizens of this planet without due cause,” Loki said. “Nothing links Clint, Wanda, or Vision to the deception about James. Nor either of you, Pietro, or Maria.”

Darcy heaved a sigh. “Okay, so we’re doing this. Fantastic. Friday, can you let those three know they’re coming with us?”

“Yes,” Friday said.

“Tony, uh… damn. Guess we’re leaving Jane and Helen in charge of the invalid crew,” Darcy said. “I’ll get Clint to pass along some safe spots to them before we go as insurance. Sharon, Jane, Helen, Bruce, and Pietro stay here, and they can vanish if something goes wrong on our end.”

“It seems a sound plan,” Loki said.

Tony drained the last of his coffee. “Okay, I need more caffeine, a shower, and a very expensive suit before we leave, so I’ll see you two on the jet.”

He glanced back at them as he left. Loki was making himself a coffee with Darcy’s machine, while Darcy lay back on the couch and closed her eyes.

Peaceful, even in the middle of all this.

He envied her.

Tony couldn’t decide if he felt better or worse for having disembarked.

On the one hand, the flight itself had been passed in tense silence, and the anticipation, dread, and curiosity were now over.

On the other, they now had to actually face Secretary Ross and Secretary General Yannic Berntsen of the Netherlands, who according to Darcy and Natasha were now best of friends. Not to mention the foreboding images of the headquarters still stuck in his head from when they’d swung in to land the chopper: it was a massive cylindrical building drilled into the bedrock of an underwater plateau, stubbornly resisting hammering blows from the stormy seas around it. All in all, Tony had felt like he was entering a scene from a melodramatic turn-of-the-century science fiction novel.

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“Is it just me, or is it worrying that this thing’s clearly been like two years premeditated?” Darcy muttered.

Loki, disguised as her blue-eyed sandy-haired kind-faced assistant, scanned their surroundings. “They have evidently been preparing to rein in the Avengers for some time. Or, at least, to contain… rogue enhanced humans.”

“Cameras,” Maria said. “Bugs.”

“I have us shielded,” Loki said. “Any cameras or bugs will report nothing but mundane
“He’s so useful,” Clint whispered to Maria.

Tony glanced back at Wanda. She was looking around with wide eyes, walking at Vision’s side and unconsciously pressing close to him for comfort. Vision shot Tony a wide-eyed look that screamed what do I do, which Tony might have found funny under normal circumstances—Vision was shockingly human sometimes—but ignored right now.

They made it through the hallway the UN troops had guided them too. Tony glanced back at his team and then shoved the double doors open.

Command center. An impressive one, by all counts. Multiple isolated glass-walled command rooms, screens and technicians and lackeys lining the walls, important-looking people in uniforms bustling about.

“Mr. Stark!”

Tony turned.

“Secretary Ross,” he said, shaking the other man’s hand with a deliberately irritated expression.

“Pleasure. And Secretary General Berntsen.”

“So nice to see you again,” Berntsen said.

Tony skipped completely over all the pleasantries. “Darcy Lewis, the Avengers’ PR manager. Vision, our… ah… newest recruit. Wanda Maximoff. Clint Barton and Maria Hill, formerly of SHIELD.”

“Thank you all for coming,” Berntsen said with an obsequious smile. Tony had only met the man once before, and then only briefly, but it hadn’t taken more than two minutes to decide he hated the Secretary General. “If you’ll accompany me…”

He led them into one of the command centers, and tapped something out on a control panel to one side. “The glass is now one-way,” he explained smugly. Old tech, you dumbass, no need to sound so proud. “We now have our privacy. You Americans consider that of great value, yes?”

“I’m not American,” Wanda said tightly.

“And Ms. Hill’s family is from Spain, while I am, as the saying goes, currently without country,” Vision added. “We are not so uniform as all that, sir.”

Tony wished he could keep his tone of voice as perfectly bland, even, and polite as Vision could. Then again, Vision’s mastery of the technique probably had a lot to do with the fact that, technically, his consciousness was an AI animated by an android brain and weird space energy they still didn’t understand.

“Oh of course not,” Berntsen agreed, still smiling. “Foolish of me… Ah, yes, here we are.” He tapped the table, which was familiar, to activate an equally familiar interface. Oh, lookie there, using Stark Industries hardware and software. Color me flattered.

“Now, the matter at hand…” Berntsen splayed his hands wide. Okay, really? This is getting ridiculous. “We find ourselves in rather a difficult position at present.”

“What he means,” Ross said, “is that three of your teammates were found conspiring with an
assassin and wanted criminal who is a known agent of both Hydra and rogue elements of the KGB, who facial recognition software has pinned as Steve Rogers’ one-time best friend.”

“He’s not being very cooperative so far,” Berntsen said, “but some Hydra people are, and turns out, Mr. Barnes has been a subject of human experimentation for Hydra’s aims for the last fifty years. In fact, many of them are under the impression that Hydra ran the KGB branch which wielded both Mr. Barnes and Ms. Romanoff before her… ah… conversion to SHIELD.”

Tony was aware of Loki’s fingers gently pressing into Darcy’s back, out of Ross and Berntsen’s lines of sight. Clint somehow managed to come across as alert but relaxed, while Maria and Wanda both fairly vibrated with tension.

“The question is whether or not anyone else on this team has been compromised,” Berntsen said. “Which is the reason we’ve called you here today. There is, of course, the official signing of the Accords, scheduled to take place later this week, as I’m sure you’re aware, but today remains simply a… preliminary vetting.”

“So we’re to be questioned about whether or not we’ve had contact with wanted fugitives?” Maria said. “Beyond the several dozen international arms dealers, black market bioweapons manufacturers, human trafficking and smuggling lords, and crime kingpins we’ve brought down in the last few months, that is.”

“Precisely,” Berntsen said. “I’m so glad you understand. Ms. Hill, if you could follow me, please? We’ll get you squared away.”

Maria followed him out without a backwards glance.

The door fell almost all the way closed before someone caught its edge and hauled it open once more.

Tony raised his eyebrows. “I’d have dressed nicer if I was going to meet royalty today.”

Prince T’Challa of Wakanda nodded coolly in his direction. Tony glanced through the glass; four people he assumed made up the prince’s entourage waited outside, all of them dignified and impassive.

“Mr. Stark. It is an honor to make your acquaintance,” Prince T’Challa said. “And—Miss Lewis?”

“The one and only,” Darcy said with a disarming smile.

“My Foreign Minister is looking forward to meeting you,” T’Challa said. “She waits outside. I understand you were supposed to have lunch together, but as circumstances have provided this opportunity, would you be amenable to speaking with her now?”

“I would,” Darcy said, showing not a trace of surprise. Tony noted with interest and not a little glee that Ross was rapidly approaching a nice tomato shade over losing control of the conversation. “May I bring my assistant with me?”

“Of course.” T’Challa introduced himself to Loki, who maintained his ‘nice guy’ façade with impressive skill. “Foreign Minister Mahad waits outside, Miss Lewis.”

“It was an honor to meet you,” Darcy said, and dipped her head, and left.

“Huh,” Clint said. “Darcy Lewis, using a gesture of deference. Who’d have thought it possible?”
Tony rolled his eyes.

T’Challa blinked at them.

“Is there a reason you’ve interrupted these proceedings, Your Highness?” Ross said stiffly. He clearly had no idea how to handle someone he disagreed with but couldn’t bully.

T’Challa didn’t smile, didn’t so much as blink. He had the kind of face, Tony noticed, that was marked with the expressions of habitual kindness, but that you could easily imagine hardening into cold implacability. Not unlike Steve, actually. “I was curious to meet the much-vaunted leader of the Avengers,” he said.

“Oh, I’m not in charge,” Tony said. “I just fund everything, design everything, make everyone look cooler.”

“You are a scientist and also a warrior,” T’Challa said. Not a question.

“Sure, that about sums it up. Proper Jekyll and Hyde over here,” Clint said.

Ross glanced at his phone. “Mr. Barton. Please step outside—my aide Ms. Parks will see you to your questioning room.”

Clint glanced around. “See you guys later.” He briskly left the room.

“Which of us will you be questioning today, Secretary Ross?” Wanda said politely.

Ross blinked at her with vague distaste. “Ah. Hill, Barton, yourself, and Vision. Lewis and her… assistant are exempt.”

“Interrogations?” T’Challa asked.

“Simple interviews,” Ross said. “To make sure none of them is as clearly compromised as Wilson, Rogers, and Romanoff.”

“Ah, yes. The Winter Soldier.” T’Challa glanced at his entourage. “Secretary, would you give us a moment, please?”

It was not a request.

“Of course,” Ross said, though he was clearly not happy about it. “Miss Maximoff, if you will accompany me, please.”

Wanda glanced at Tony, who nodded to her, and left with him.

Leaving Tony, Vision, and T’Challa alone in the room.

T’Challa pulled a small black device out of his pocket and placed it on the table. It beeped softly. “All electrical monitoring devices in this room are now compromised,” he said flatly.

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Ross’ll have a hissy fit.”

“Let him.” T’Challa almost cracked a smile. “My country is a representative republic, but I am still a foreign head of state. He shouldn’t be spying on my private conversations in the first place. Nor yours, but to be frank, I have more latitude within which I can work against him.”

Tony shoved his hands in his pockets. Staying casual, relaxed. Confident. “I assume you want

Vision stepped forward and shook T’Challa’s hand. “I am honored to meet you, Your Majesty.”

“I understand we cannot properly do away with titles, but please call me Prince T’Challa,” he said. “It’s slightly less formal. I understand your body is comprised of human tissue linked bonded to vibranium on an atomic level and animated by the gem in your forehead.”

“Yes,” Vision said.

“What is the gem?”

“We still do not fully understand it,” Vision said, neatly sidestepping the question.

T’Challa clearly caught the evasion—his lips quirked, and one eyebrow twitched a fraction—but he didn’t comment. “And Dr. Helen Cho created your body?”

“She has developed revolutionary healing and tissue-replicating technology in the last several years,” Vision said. “It was used to create this body while she was under the control of Hydra.”

“So the gem that powered Loki’s scepter is now an integral part of one of the Avengers, his great enemies,” T’Challa mused.

“Shakespearean irony, I know,” Tony said.

T’Challa opened his mouth.

Ross yanked the door open and glared at Tony. “Vision, with me.”

Vision bowed to T’Challa. “I have enjoyed speaking with you. Perhaps we could continue this discussion at a later date.”

“Perhaps,” T’Challa said, and then Vision was gone, too.

Tony met the other man’s eyes and sensed that they were only now getting to the heart of whatever T’Challa had come here to say.

“Mr. Stark, I must admit, it was not coincidence that brought us both here at the same time,” T’Challa said.

“No, of course not,” Tony sighed. “Mahad and Lewis’ conversation is the equivalent of back-channel international diplomacy? Which makes this, what, the big official summit that doesn’t actually get anything done?”

T’Challa smiled just slightly. “I would hope we won’t be so ineffective as all that. We’re not so different, after all. We should be able to come to a consensus.”

“I’ve never had any kind of royal title tacked onto my name,” Tony said. “Which is a shame because I’m pretty sure I’d look damn good in a crown, but—point is, I’m a businessman, a scientist, a… soldier of some stripe, a private citizen. You’re a statesman.”

“We are both scientists,” T’Challa said. “We are both warriors despite that not being our natural inclination. We both stand at or near the forefront of a group of influential people at a moment of decision for our world’s history. Is that not similar enough?”
“You’ve sure done your homework.”

“I have,” T’Challa said. “I’ve read all your papers, in fact. Your advances in clean energy are brilliant, particularly when combined with Dr. Foster’s pioneering work in subatomic particles, string theory, and Einstein-Rosen bridges.” He actually did the research, and understands it. Tony looked at T’Challa in a new light. “I’ve been particularly impressed by the creation of integrated neural prostheses, and your company has been selling them for a fraction of what you could charge—”

“Still enough to turn a profit,” Tony said. “And a comfortable one. I do have shareholders.”

“But you are a philanthropist,” T’Challa said. “That was what truly convinced me to come here today.”

“Oh, so there is a point to all this.” Tony couldn’t help it, even though he knew Darcy and Steve would be appalled if they heard he was delivering sarcasm to a prince, and one of their few allies at that. It was reflexive. A defense mechanism for when he felt boxed in. He couldn’t tell what T’Challa wanted. Darcy’d said the Wakandans had backed her, but Tony didn’t trust them. T’Challa’s faint smile grew a fraction. “Of course. I would not waste your or my valuable time otherwise. Simply put, I wish to know how the Avengers intend to respond to the Accords.”

“And I assume Mahad’s out there giving Darcy the same talk?” Tony said.

“Pursuing the same line of inquiry, yes.”

“Huh.” Tony studied the other man. “Let’s just say—can I be honest?”

“By all means,” T’Challa said.

Tony activated his own jammer, tucked into his pocket. Just in case. “One scientist to another, I want to trust you. You’ll understand why it’s hard. But I’ll give this a shot. We’ve opposed the Accords every step of the way. But we’ll cave to the pressure. I mean, this is almost two hundred countries signing this thing with us, so it’s not like we have a choice.” He flicked his eyebrows up at the ceiling, holding eye contact, hoping T’Challa would read the subtext.

The prince nodded slowly. “You will voluntarily shackle yourself to the oversight of a committee of bureaucrats?”

Tony gave him a humorless smile. “Funny, that’s almost exactly how Rogers described this arrangement last week.”

T’Challa studied him for a long second. Tony examined him right back.

“I’m glad we understand each other,” T’Challa said, extending his hand.

Tony shook it. “Yeah, me too.”

“I’ve also been asked to pass on a message,” T’Challa said. “From a… friend of yours. His name is Phil Coulson.”

Tony breathed an internal sigh of relief. “No one told us anything. He’s all right?”

“Very much so,” T’Challa said. “He requested that if I saw you, I inform you that he remains a steadfast ally to the Avengers, and while he does not wish to contact you directly, he is working towards the same objectives you are.”
“Keeping his reputation intact by not contacting us. “Darcy is being told this as well?”

T’Challa nodded once.

“Thanks,” Tony said. “Is this the first time you’ve been delegated to messenger boy?”

T’Challa’s eyes crinkled with a restrained smile. “We all must make sacrifices for a good cause.”

Tony nodded slowly. “So—is there a coffee machine anywhere on this rock? I’m in desperate need of more caffeine.” It might be crossing some line to ask a foreign royal to show him the coffee machine, but so what? T’Challa was a prince but he was also a person, and Tony recognized something of himself in the other man’s eyes.

“I believe it is not strictly for our use,” T’Challa said, “but Ministers Mahad and Said have used it already. I can show you?”

“Please,” Tony said.

They stepped outside, T’Challa collecting his jammer along the way.

Darcy, Loki, and Astur Mahad—a stunning woman in her forties with a shaved head and long gold earrings that contrasted brilliantly with her dark skin—found them just outside the command center.

“Oh good, you’re getting along,” Darcy said with a grin. “Coffee?”

“You’re getting to know me too well, Lewis,” Tony said.

“Predicting your caffeine runs is the easiest part of my job,” Darcy retorted.

T’Challa followed this familiar exchange with not a little curiosity.

Tony raised an eyebrow at him and kept walking. Darcy clearly agreed that they ought to let the Wakandans see behind the veil a little bit. T’Challa could think what he wanted of their almost familial interactions.

Coffee in hand, they returned to the command center.

Tony got two steps inside before he clocked Ross’ expression, which was an odd mix of furious and triumphant.

“Oh shit,” Darcy muttered.

Loki, playing the role of her assistant, remained silent, but Tony felt the prickling in his skin that meant Loki’s seidr was powering up and ready for use.

“Your Highness,” Ross said, nodding respectfully to T’Challa. “This is a matter to be settled by myself and the Avengers. For confidentiality purposes, I must request privacy for this conversation. I hope you understand.”

“Of course,” T’Challa said, slipping back into the royal role. Tony hadn’t realized until it came back that it had been gone in the first place, and wished he’d paid more attention to the changes in T’Challa’s mannerisms. “We will return to our quarters. Our objectives for this visit have been completed.” He was deft enough to not look at Tony when he said it.

T’Challa walked away. Mahad murmured a few words to Darcy, who replied in the same tone, and joined the rest of the prince’s entourage.
“Our initial interviews are complete,” Ross said.

Tony glanced behind him and saw Maria and Vision walking toward them. His initial response was *relief*. But then he noticed—

“Where are Wanda and Clint?” Darcy demanded.

Ross’ mustache twitched. “They’ve both been found guilty of aiding and abetting a wanted fugitive—”

“What?” Tony snapped.

“By what jury?” Darcy said.

“By the powers vested in myself as Chairman of the United Nations Avengers Task Force,” Ross said, pulling himself up taller. “I assure you, it’s well within my jurisdiction.”

“By the powers vested in myself as Chairman of the United Nations Avengers Task Force,” Ross said, pulling himself up taller. “I assure you, it’s well within my jurisdiction.”

“They picked *you* to lead the task force?” Darcy said. “You’re Secretary of State for the United States—”

“I’ve had dealings with you in the past,” Ross said. “Particularly Dr. Banner, who many now consider to be exceedingly dangerous. I understand he’s sleeping off the effects of some toxin, but we’ll expect him to take a trip out here for the microchip and physical examination as soon as the Accords are signed.”

*He’ll never sign them.* Tony hated this, *hated* feeling trapped, hated that his people were here somewhere and imprisoned and unable to leave, hated that he couldn’t just call the suit he had waiting in his chopper and unleash everything he had on them. With Loki’s help, he knew he could do it—

“Tony, hold this for a sec?” Darcy said, and passed him her coffee, pretending to shuffle around in the papers in her purse.

Tony took the mug automatically, then realized—she’d given it to him to occupy his hands. To calm him down.

Ross ignored them. “Miss Maximoff and Mr. Barton have been incarcerated with the others.”

“We’ll need to see them,” Darcy said.

“That won’t be possible.”

“And why the hell not?” Tony demanded.

“They might have acted outside the law but they’re still our teammates,” Darcy added. *Pretending to concede, nice touch.*

“Any outside contact for today is forbidden,” Ross said. “If you wish, you can spend tonight in our guest quarters and visit them tomorrow. We have a few more questions to ask them this—” He checked his watch. “Would you look at that. It’s already noon. Afternoon, I suppose.”

“Then we’ll be going to those guest rooms,” Darcy said, her spine ramrod straight. “Which of course will be free of remote monitoring devices.”

Again, the mustache twitch. Tony wanted to shave it off. “Of course.”
Yeah, no. Tony would be passing jammers out to all of them.

Maria and Vision joined them. “You heard?” Maria said, face grim.

Tony nodded.

“Can you find someone to show us the way?” Darcy asked.

“In a moment,” Ross said. “Mr. Stark. I have something you should see.”

He led them into the command room.

Tony waited impatiently while Ross swiped his way through the table’s interface. Maria, Loki, Darcy, and Vision waited around the table as well, and while the prickling of Loki’s magic had gone down, it hadn’t gone away entirely, and all the others were just as tense.

*It could’ve gone worse,* Tony reminded himself. They could all be in cells. And they’d go back to their guest rooms and between the five of them, they could come up with a plan, now that they had a better idea of what exactly was happening out here, and they’d get the others out—

A shaky poor-quality video started playing. Ross stepped back expectantly.

Tony frowned. The screen showed a dark, curving road, bordered by an embankment on one side and a guardrail on the other. Trees loomed. It was evening, but not yet full dark.

“What is—”

Then he saw the car.

Tony’s mouth dried up. That was—that was his parents’ car. He knew it like he knew his own name, and suddenly he knew exactly what was going to happen here, he’d seen the pictures, though how they had video he didn’t know and didn’t want to know, he couldn’t watch this—

But he couldn’t make himself step away.

His parents’ last moments, on video.

The car accident that cost their lives and anything left of his childhood.

It slammed into the bank with a squeal.

The driver’s door opened and a white-haired Howard Stark toppled out onto the pavement.

Tony’s fists clenched. *Dad. Dad, I’m so sorry* —

Then.

Another figure walked around the car.

Tall. Medium-length dark brown hair. Blank face.

Silver-plated prosthetic arm.

Tony stopped breathing. Stopped doing anything except watch.

“Tony,” Vision said softly.
Ross made a hushing sound.

Tony realized his hands were shaking as, on the screen, the Winter Soldier lifted Howard’s head up by the hair. As his father, who never asked for a thing from anyone, begged for his life. As the Winter Soldier slammed his metal left fist into Howard’s face.

Once.

Twice.

Howard crumpled like a sack of limp bones. Tony knew he was dead.

The Soldier walked around to the other side of the car. Unhurried, unfeeling. A woman’s pleading gasps came over the grainy, shaky audio. “Howard… H-Howard… please…”

“Mom,” Tony whispered.

There was a hand on his shoulder. He didn’t know who it belonged to. Didn’t care.

The Soldier reached into the car. The faint, wounded voice choked off with a gasp.

James Buchanan Barnes’ face was the only part of him visible over the top of the car. It didn’t change an iota as he choked the life out of Tony’s mother.

When it was done, he turned around and walked out of the frame.

The video cut off.

Tony didn’t know what to say. Do. Words were foreign.

Darcy asked a question. Tony didn’t bother to listen.

Ross opened his mouth to reply.

Tony’s head snapped up and his eyes focused on Ross, who had the good sense to look slightly nervous. “Where are they?”

“Stark—”

“Where are they?”

“You can’t see them today,” Ross said.

And there it was. Smugness. That insufferable arrogance, complacency—Ross had shown this to get a reaction, and Tony was giving it to him.

He didn’t care. He was going to kill Barnes.

He was going to kill the man who’d murdered his parents.

And if Steve got in the way—if Steve had known—or Natasha—they were going down too.

He flexed his wrist. The metal cuffs hidden by his shirt clicked and expanded into a gauntlet that whirred to life. He aimed at Ross. “Take me to them. Right. Now.”

“Maria—Maria, I know you have one—”
“Lewis, stay out of this,” he ordered.

Darcy stepped into his line of sight, face grim. “You should know by now I don’t stay out of anything, Tony.”

He stepped forward.

Something pricked his neck.

Tony slapped his free hand to the pain. His fingers hit—a cold barrel. Other fingers.

He spun around.

Maria took the empty injector gun back and slid it into a hidden pocket in her suit. Unapologetic.

“How,” Tony began, and then everything around him dissolved into a kaleidoscope of colors and voices.

He was on the floor. When did he get on the floor?

People were lifting him. Cool skin both. Loki and Vision, then. They slung his arms over their shoulders. Darcy was talking, Ross was talking, no one was doing anything.

Tony didn’t care. He couldn’t find it in him to care about anything right now except replaying the sound of his mother’s voice, pleading for his father right before she died.

There were tears on his face.
Darcy stared at Tony’s closed door.

It was seven thirty-eight. Maria had said she gave him enough tranquilizer to keep him out for seven hours, give or take. He should be waking up soon.

Loki was on standby just outside their shared living room, hiding in the kitchen and ready to pin Tony in place if he woke up and kicked right into Kill Bucky Barnes mode. Not that Darcy fully blamed him for his anger. Anyone would have a bad reaction to finding out their parents were murdered and not killed in an accident by watching a video of their deaths with no warning whatsoever, much less Tony Stark and his nine billion pounds of repressed emotional baggage. But she also knew Bucky hadn’t been Bucky when he killed Howard and Maria Stark, so she wasn’t about to let Tony blast him into oblivion.

Especially because she knew Steve and Natasha and probably Sam would take Bucky’s side. Tony could handle Bucky, probably, if he had his suit, and possibly both Bucky and Steve. But all of them? He’d be screwed.

“Shouldn’t he be awake by now?” she said.

Maria shrugged. She had gone to use the exercise machines while Darcy and Loki toured the facility to kill time, then come back, showered, found a seat, and stayed there for an hour. “Stress and other factors can change the time he’s under. It may also have taken longer to kick in since he was pretty keyed up when I nailed him.”

Vision stepped into the room. “I found no trace of the others.”

“You searched the whole place?” Darcy said.

“Not precisely. I can become intangible but not invisible,” Vision said, “and Loki’s illusions have no effect on me. There were some aspects of the building I could not infiltrate without being seen. I did not descend more than four floors below sea level.”

“How many floors did you not explore?”

“At least thirteen,” Vision said. “Likely more, but I am uncertain precisely how deep into the bedrock the facility extends.”

“Great.”

Maria and Darcy exchanged a glance.

Tony’s door opened.

Darcy and Maria instantly snapped their attention to the rumpled Tony Stark.

“No worries,” he said with a twisted mockery of a smile. “I’ve been awake for an hour and a half. Figured you’d have voodoo man ready to hold me down if I made a break for it. I’m cool.”
Loki stepped out of the kitchen.

“Oh,” Tony said. “Oh, he was actually just waiting there. Okay. Lots of trust here.”

“If you remember how you were acting before I tranqued you, you’ll understand why we took precautions,” Maria said.

Tony’s hands flexed at his sides. “I know why.”

“You’re not going to run off and demand to see, and kill, Bucky?” Darcy said. “I need to know, and then I need to sleep, because this has been a long day and I’m going to get up at like four tomorrow so I can wake Ross up at five and piss him off.”

“He won’t be sleeping well tonight in any case,” Loki said with a barbed smile.

Darcy grinned at him. “This is why I like you. Tony? Convince me you’re stable.”

“I’m not going to kill him,” Tony said.

“That did not seem particularly convincing,” Vision murmured.

“Remind me why you’re qualified to make that call?” Tony said. “You’re like a month old.”

“Tony,” Maria chided.

He pressed his lips together, but his posture went from hostile back to just tense, so Darcy took it as a good sign.

“I get it,” Tony said, looking down. “That wasn’t—him. James. He was a Hydra puppet.”

Yep.” Darcy waited.

Tony finally sighed and sat down on the sofa across from her. Vision and Loki drifted over as well, Vision perching on an armchair near Tony and Loki settling next to Darcy with a hand absently on her knee. She refused to let herself get distracted by the touch.

“It was still his hands that did it,” Tony said at last. “His… that arm. I tried to repair it, I—”

“You gave him a new one,” Maria said gently. “You helped him get a fresh start, Tony. He doesn’t even remember being that person.”

Tony closed his eyes. “I know he doesn’t remember. But now I won’t be able to look at him and not see his face as he pressed his hand into my mother’s throat until she stopped breathing.”

Heavy silence.

“I believe we have extra incentive to procure Sam’s release,” Loki said. “We need our resident therapist back.”

Impossibly, Tony laughed. It was shaky and hesitant, but sincere.

Darcy did too—she couldn’t help it. Maria and Vision both watched with vague disapproval.

“Tony, you’ll… we need to get them out,” Maria said. “You’ll help with that?”

“I—yeah,” Tony said. “Yeah. But we need to figure out how to deprogram him.”
“I believe I can help with that,” Loki said. “If he will permit me to alter his mind.”

Darcy grinned. “Seeing as the alternative is years of SHIELD conditioning we don’t have the time for, I’m pretty sure he’ll go for it.”

Vision glanced over his shoulder. “Darcy, your phone has been chiming in your room, quite frequently.”

“Oh,” she said, “shit, I forgot that was back there—Be right back.” She jumped up off the couch and jogged back to get it, relieved, even in the middle of the mess their team had become, that Tony had managed himself.

Then she picked up her phone and saw the bevy of missed calls, texts, emails, and media notifications.

She went through the media first.

Then the emails, texts, and calls.

It wasn’t pretty.

“Guys,” she said, interrupting a quiet conversation between Tony and Vision about something scieney. “So… someone released to the press that five of the Avengers are currently imprisoned because they’ve been harboring a known fugitive serial-murdering Hydra agent—not my words—and they’ve also found out about the Daavi, which has half the world’s countries gearing up for war and the other half making noises about diplomacy. We’re at the center of an international shitstorm.”

Loki sat up, eyes on her. Darcy wished she could read what he was thinking. Wished she could silence the tiny nagging doubtful voice in her head whispering he’s using you. Wished this was all over, just so she could talk to him—try to figure out a solution to this impossible relationship.

But nooo, the world just had to throw a second alien invasion in the way of Darcy’s life. Fuck you, karma.

“Public opinion no longer on our side, then?” Maria said.

Darcy laughed. It came out hollow. “Definitely not. If anything it’s against us. Or—okay, so the climate among the actual governments is insanely hostile, and same in the media, but to what extent people actually agree with them at this point I can’t tell you. It’ll get bad soon, though. If every media outlet everywhere is screaming about how evil we are, anyone who’s hesitant to think the Avengers are the bad guys will eventually cave. We’ve got support in the UN and the Avengers Task Force—specifically, Coulson, the Wakandans, and Sabina Prescott—if we decide to trust the Wakandans, which I’m inclined to do but not totally sure about yet—but the point is we’re kind of up shit creek right now.”

“Is there no way to get our story out there?” Vision said. “The true story, that is.”

“Considering how our last appearance on TV went?” Darcy shook her head. “Wouldn’t advise it. I mean, we can release press statements all we like, but—”

“Virus,” Tony said.

They all stared at him.

“A virus,” he said, grinning maniacally. It was better than broken, shaky, clearly barely-in-control,
but still made Darcy slightly nervous. Mostly because she knew what kind of shit she got up to when her facial expressions were veering towards maniacal. “Hijack all the major media outlets, and the minor ones—oh this is going to be fun. We’ll put a video up—us talking, or something, with—James—explaining, and us saying what really happened when we went after the Daavi—”

Darcy’s eyes were wide. She ignored her still-beeping phone. “You can do that? Wait—stupid question.” She looked at Loki reflexively, wondered when he’d become the person she automatically reached out to for feedback and opinions, and brushed her psychoanalysis aside for later. “Do we tell the whole truth? That we’ve been hiding him? People will be suspicious if Ryan Dessen quits showing up to shit right at the same time Bucky Barnes is reintegrated with the Avengers—”

“I appeared as Dessen when fighting the Hulk, and he’s not made an appearance since,” Loki said. "We can claim he died of injuries sustained saving Anchorage. It would perhaps dilute the effectiveness of our message if we admit to having hidden the Winter Soldier among ourselves for so long.”

“So… what, we say… Steve and Natasha found him a few months ago and they’ve been communicating with him cautiously, trying to rehabilitate him,” Darcy said. “And he was trying to, what, prove his loyalty by helping against the Daavi, but then Hydra whipped out their conditioning and fucked with his head, so he bolted… It’ll help that he didn’t hurt anyone, just ran off—that shows the programming’s been weakened.”

“And it allows us to portray him as the victim,” Loki said. “Which only furthers your case.”

“If we can get this message out there…” She trailed off, mind spinning with all the possible ways she could use this.

“We should maybe sleep now, though,” Maria said. “Especially if you’re going to be waking Ross up ridiculously early. And—Loki, what did you mean, he’s not going to sleep well?”

Darcy, because she’d already guessed the gist of what Loki meant to do, snickered.

“His quarters will not be remotely peaceful,” Loki said with a shrug. “I’m afraid he may even find himself plagued by strange noises and sights that will never appear on camera or in recordings. I do hope the good Secretary doesn’t come to question his own sanity…” Smirking, Loki walked out of the room.

“I’m glad he’s on our side,” Maria muttered, and stood herself, looking at Tony. “You’ll be okay for the night?”

“No need for a baby monitor,” Tony said irritatedly.

Maria shrugged. “Just checking. Good night.”

Darcy saw Vision and Tony down the hall toward their own rooms, waited until their doors closed, and went into Loki’s room instead of her own.

He was already changed into sweatpants, and shirtless. Darcy’s mind immediately got stuck on Loki’s excellent muscles.

“I set an alarm spell,” Loki said. “If he attempts to leave before we do, we’ll be woken up, and he will not be able to unlock the front door.”

“Uh. Right, good, thanks,” Darcy said, refocusing with an effort. Judging by Loki’s smirk, he knew exactly why she’d been distracted. She tugged her own shirt off as she walked toward the bathroom,
noting the way his eyes widened a fraction. *Payback, bitch.* “So… Tony saw me leaving your room this morning. And he saw that you’ve been added to the scanner on my door.”

“He seemed willing to not ask questions,” Loki said.

“Yeah, but he’ll bring it up with the others later.” Darcy shucked off her bra and stole one of Loki’s clean shirts, then tossed her pants the same direction as her shirt and bra had gone. She’d dig up her own bag in the morning. Or possibly just make Loki summon it. Magic was useful. “Do you care?”

“Do you?”

“They don’t get to police my choices,” she said, joining him on the edge of the bed. “At least, not this one. And I’m not ashamed. I was just… hoping to avoid that drama until after.”

“Few things are so easy,” Loki said. His eyes were green and depthless. Unfathomable.

She looked away. “True.”

He lifted her chin with a finger. “I am not ashamed of you, either, Darcy Lewis.”

“Are you sure?” she said. “Because I’ve not gotten the impression that Asgardians like humans all that much.”

He swallowed. “I am. Not… of Asgard,” he said.

“So that’s your big secret,” she said, not quite able to bite down on her curiosity but knowing she couldn’t push too hard. “Still not going to tell me where you’re actually from?”

Loki looked away.

*I recognize the effort it took you to say those words*, she wanted to say, or, *thank you for telling me*. But what came out of her mouth was “Doesn’t seem like Thor’s really worth familial attachment anyway.”

Loki laughed shortly. “Not particularly. Or, at least, I no longer think so.”

“There you go.” She nudged him gently with her shoulder. “Okay, enough sappy crap, let’s prank the ever loving shit out of Ross.”

Loki waggled his fingers, green sparks dancing there. Darcy felt her own trickle of *seidr* perk up in response. “Where should we start?” he said with a grin.

Darcy tapped her fingers on her thighs. “I was thinking movement in his peripheral vision. At first just flickers and shadows and shit, then like eyes and talons. Maybe a tail. Weird noises.”

“Excellent plan,” Loki said. “I also intend to raise the temperature of his room just slightly. Enough to be uncomfortable.”

“Perfect.”
“Mr. Stark, are you sure you’re stable enough to see Mr. Barnes?” Ross asked.

Tony glared at him. He hated this man more with every passing moment. An hour spent lying on the bed in his guest room, struggling to find some kind of steady ground, had resulted in the realization that while he shouldn’t hate James for… for what he’d done, he could and should hate Ross. He relished the fact that Ross had bags under his glazed eyes and was clutching a massive coffee mug.

“Very,” he said stiffly. “A warning would’ve been appreciated before you showed me a video of my parents being murdered in cold blood, but such is the peril of working with a bureaucrat. Lead on.”

Ross’ face contorted as if he were trying to decide how badly he’d just been insulted. Darcy made a mocking face behind his back that almost had Tony laughing despite the sick, churning anticipation in his stomach.

“This way,” he said, apparently choosing to ignore Tony’s comment until he was awake enough to process it, and set off down the hallway.

Darcy grinned at Tony and fell in beside him. “You tell him,” she whispered.

Loki, Maria, and Vision followed behind. Tony knew if he made any sort of move Loki and Vision were prepared to restrain him at a second’s notice. It was annoying, but not unreasonable, and he checked his anger with every step. They didn’t deserve it. And he couldn’t blame them for not taking him at his word that he was past trying to kill James. Even though he’d meant it.

Ross led the way to a large central bank of elevators, swiped his hand over a scanner, and booted several scientist types out of the one in the middle. They piled in. Tony wanted to make some sarcastic comment to break the awkward silence but he couldn’t speak around the tension that coiled his muscles tighter with every passing second.

They dropped. And dropped. And dropped.

“Anyone else having flashbacks to reading Inferno in college?” Darcy muttered.

“I never attended college,” Vision said. “As well you know.”

“Rhetorical question, Deus Ex Machina,” she said sardonically.

Ross glared at them. “This is the opposite of hellish chaos, Miss Lewis.”

“Hell in the Inferno was actually really well organized,” she said. “I assume you’ve got air conditioning? And any screams of the damned are well contained in soundproof rooms?”

Her smile was nasty.

Ross didn’t answer.

Loki and Darcy exchanged a pleased look.
Tony wondered what exactly they’d done to him the previous night. The Secretary of State was really not looking good.

“Here we are,” Ross said. Tony glanced around but there were no indicators of the floor on the inside of the elevator. Strange. He discreetly tapped at his watch, telling Friday to try and determine how far below sea level they were.

“They’re just down this way,” Ross said, gesturing.

Tony looked down the hallway and raised his eyebrows. It was well-lit, and blocked at regular intervals by six-inch-thick steel doors, all of which were open but could clearly be closed to make the place ridiculously secure. At the end, a final bunker-style door, except with more electronic security than you ever saw in movies, closed off the hall.

“We’re burrowed into the bedrock underneath the most secure facility in the world,” Ross said. “Which is also underwater and staffed by one thousand five hundred and seventeen United Nations troops.” Subtext: your friends aren’t going anywhere. Tony swallowed back his anger and nodded briskly.

“Impressive setup.”

“How long have you been building this?” Maria asked, frowning at the first set of bunker doors as they passed.

“Eh… three years, give or take,” Ross said.

Tony stared at him.

Ross shrugged unapologetically. “It’s been a massive effort to keep it a secret, I can tell you that. We anticipated needing a place to incarcerate enhanced people, and a command center for independent task forces like this.”

“You mean bureaucratic ticks feeding off of society and immune to democratic nuisances like, I don’t know, elections?” Darcy said.

Ross stared at her.

She blinked sweetly at him. “We’d like to speak with them in private, please.”

“No.”

“Come off it, you have cameras,” she said. “It’s not real privacy. I’m guessing they might be a little more… cooperative if it’s just us. They’re probably not feeling too nicely about you right now.”

Ross huffed. “Fine. But I’ll be watching everything. If you even start fiddling with their doors, I’ll flood the room with tear gas. That door will open when I hit the cell overwatch post.”

He stomped away.

“Such an original threat,” Loki murmured, smirking. “I’m terrified.”

Darcy looked at him with raised eyebrows.

He cocked his head and a look of concentration crossed his face. “Done.”

“What’s done?” Maria asked.
“I’ve made us immune to surveillance,” Loki said. “Any conversation involving secure information, such as this one, will appear to them entirely harmless and useless in every respect.”

Tony peered at Loki and Darcy. Darcy had communicated a request for that to Loki with only a glance. They worked together with all the ease of…

A couple?

The door clunked open.

Darcy and Loki hung back.

Tony took a deep breath and stepped into the cell complex.

It was better and worse than he’d expected.

Clean surfaces. White light. Simple cells, but small—especially for people like Natasha and Steve—furnished with cots, benches, simple shelves, and bathroom cubicles. Heavy-duty bars on the doors. Slots above and below each cell suggesting that either bulletproof glass or metal bulwarks could be remotely slammed into place, possibly both, sealing the cell off from the rest of the building.

All told, an impressive security system, clearly designed to handle people with abilities.

The instant Tony stepped inside, Sam, Natasha, Clint, Steve, and Bucky all focused their attention on him.

Tony ignored it. He zeroed in on the cell in the corner and his fists unconsciously clenched as he remembered—remembered that video. Bucky’s face, here and now, plainly upset and guilty and grieving, was superimposed with the impassive killer in the film.

*He killed my mother.*

*It wasn’t him.*

*His hands, his face—*

“Tony,” Steve said, so many unsaid things packed into that one word.

Tony ignored him. He walked in slow motion, or so it felt, up to Bucky’s cell.

The Winter Soldier was entirely absent from Bucky’s face as he finally met Tony’s eyes.


So different from the man on the film.

And yet—the same.

“Did you know?” Tony said, and didn’t recognize his own voice.

“Not until… yesterday,” Bucky said. Quietly. “I didn’t… didn’t remember it. Any of them. Until they—used the conditioning on me. Things started to… come back. And when they showed me the video… that was when it all—all snapped into place.” His eyes closed for a moment. “I remember them now. All of them.”

Tony nodded. He didn’t know why he was nodding, except to indicate that he’d heard.

“You’re gonna have to give me some time to process this, Rogers,” Tony said.

Darcy finally ventured farther than where she’d been waiting by the door with Vision, Loki, and Maria. “They just played him the video. No preamble, no warning, nothing. Yesterday midday.”

“It was rough going for a bit,” Maria said.

“She had to tranquilize him, is what she means,” Darcy said. “But yea, rough going about sums it up.”

Tony couldn’t bear their attention—the pity and sympathy and caution—another second. He processed the fact that he could separate Bucky from his parents’ murderer well enough to function and realized who was missing. “Where’s Wanda?”

Clint spoke up for the first time, voice tight with rage. “Back corner.”

Tony glanced around and catalogued the obvious fury on Clint, Sam, Natasha, Steve, and even Bucky’s faces. Darcy did the same, shot him a worried look, and led the way around the corner wall Clint had indicated.

She sucked in a breath of horror.

Tony stepped around to where he could see Wanda and stopped dead.

She was huddled on the ground in the corner of her cell. Wrapped in a straitjacket with a collar—a fucking collar—lined with blinking red lights around her neck.

“Who,” Darcy said. “Who did this—”

“You know who,” Natasha snarled. “Ross, and his newest crony Berntsen—”

Wanda wouldn’t look at them. Wouldn’t speak. Her lips were clamped tightly shut and her eyes were focused on the wall opposite her. Tried tear tracks marred her cheeks where her makeup had run. She was trembling with a faint all-over motion that suggested hours of perfect, terrified stillness.

Darcy whirled away from the cell and stalked back out into the main complex. Maria and Vision stepped past her to look into the cell. Vision knelt down by Wanda’s bars and began speaking, but Tony couldn’t hear him over the ringing in his ears.

“This is appalling,” Loki hissed. His eyes were snapping with a rage that reminded Tony Loki had spent a fair amount of time in cages or subject to torture. “Darcy—”

“We’re getting them out,” Tony snapped, glaring at them.

Darcy shot him an incredulous look. “Obviously.”

“Not now, or we’ll all be on the run,” Natasha said. “I’ve only not broken out because of Wanda. The second she moves too rapidly, or speaks too loudly, she gets shocked by that thing.”

“Why did they even…” Tony couldn’t find words to describe what had been done to her. Pietro was going to go ballistic.

“She fought back,” Steve said grimly.
“A lot,” Sam added. “They’re scared shitless of her.”

“For good reason,” Darcy muttered.

Clint looked at the ceiling. “I assume you’ve got blocker spells in place, Loki?”

“Since before we stepped in the door.”

“Good. Don’t wait any more than twenty-four hours. I think… I think they’re going to try to move her somewhere else.”

“Where else?” Loki demanded.

Clint shrugged, his easy demeanor entirely at odds with the anger on his face. “Somewhere worse?”

Tony clung to the injustice of this entire situation as the only stable rock among his current emotional turmoil. I wish I could just eat feelings. “We’ll leave as soon as we’re done here, and then we’re coming back.”

That got Maria’s attention. She stepped away from Wanda and rejoined them. “Break… six indicted criminals out of a UN holding facility?”

“Indicted by what fucking jury?” Darcy said.

“The one appointed by almost two hundred international representatives!” Maria retorted.

“The one that’s indifferent to democratic elections and so far removed from the actual real-life people it’s supposed to protect that it thinks it can do whatever it wants? Yeah, that’s a jury I trust—”

“This isn’t a debate,” Tony said.

Something in his voice made them both shut up and listen.

“I’m not…” He looked around, steadied his breathing, lifted his chin. “I’m done letting everyone in my life down. This system is broken. We are in the right and—and they’re torturing a woman in her twenties because she resisted being illegally imprisoned. It’s my fault they’re even here—I trusted the UN enough to bring Clint and Wanda here.” Judging by their expressions, at least Clint and Steve had thought the same exact thing.

“It’s my fault,” Tony repeated. “I’m going to make it right.”

He glared at Maria.

“I don’t disagree,” she said steadily. “I’m just trying to find a solution that doesn’t involve treason.”

“Treason,” Clint scoffed. “This isn’t a country, or an ideology, or anything we’ve even sworn ourselves to. We’d betray nothing.”

Maria’s eyes met his.

Tony didn’t know exactly what the nature of their relationship was, but there were clearly a lot of unspoken words between them, because that was one of the most charged bits of eye contact he’d ever witnessed.

“Okay,” she said quietly. “Okay. I—would still be arguing negotiation, but that—” she gestured back towards Wanda’s cell—“is unconscionable.”
“Great, we’re all on the same page. Can we go now?” Darcy asked. “Not that I want to leave you guys here, mind, it’s just that I’m exceedingly creeped out, would love to leave before Ross shows his face, and I really want to start planning how exactly we’re going to get you out of here and not get caught.”

Loki’s head snapped up.

Tony hadn’t heard anything, but Natasha, Steve, and Bucky caught it, too.

“Loki?” Steve asked.

Loki’s head angled in a disturbingly predatory way. “We’ve got ourselves a fly,” he said softly, and stretched out a hand toward a flat section of wall between Clint and Sam’s cells, speaking several inaudible words.

The wall grudgingly slid upwards, revealing a tiny observation room and a terrified consultant.

“Oh,” Darcy said.

“Shit.”

Natasha was on her feet in an instant. “You can’t kill him—”

“I am not so great a fool,” Loki said. “I see Ross was not so stupid as to imagine we would not bring jamming technology.”

The technician swallowed hard. Sweat rolled down his pallid skin. “Please don’t kill me, I swear I—I won’t say anything—”

“Oh, you swear, do you?” Loki mocked.

The technician flinched back. “They called you—called you Loki—”

Loki’s smile was not reassuring. Even through his kind assistant disguise, some of his cruelty showed through.

Darcy rubbed a hand over her forehead. “From here on out we talk as if we’re being listened to. Loki, can you take care of that?”

“Wipe his memory?” Loki said.

The technician squeaked.

Tony glanced around, expecting opposition to this idea, but he found none. Even Vision, who’d finally rejoined them. And even Steve, whose face was stony and resolute.

“Looks like you’ve got no objection,” Natasha said with a smirk.

Loki looked back down at his prey. Prey? Where did that thought come from? Target is much better. Or victim. “It’s nothing personal,” he said. “Rest assured I shall try to minimize the side effects.”

He began murmuring a few words, again too softly to hear. Or perhaps Tony’s brain just refused to process them. Either way, the technician blinked and became glassy-eyed, and his spy-hole sealed over once again.

Loki nodded to the rest of them.

“You can’t simply ignore the law,” Darcy said, and Tony was almost shocked by her acting. She
managed to change her entire demeanor in a heartbeat—going from enraged to sad but determined. “I know it’s hard, but—we’ll try to sort things out on our end. Please, just… work with them. For all our sakes.”

She glanced in Wanda’s direction one more time, then left, Loki right on her heels.

Tony looked at Steve. “She’s right. And…” He knew—he knew he had to do this convincingly. “I can’t even say his name,” he said, with a hollow laugh that felt all too sincere. “I know he was brainwashed. I know it wasn’t his choice. But he killed my parents, Steve. My mother. I can’t forgive that.”

He stormed out of the room.

Vision and Maria followed on his heels.

The bunker doors slammed shut behind them, one by one, as they walked back down that long, sterile hallway.
Chapter 171

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Classified Location], United Nations Avengers Task Force Headquarters and Maximum Security Containment Facility

May 2012

“I hate this plan.”

“Everyone hates this plan, but we haven’t got a better option,” Maria snapped, glaring at Pietro.

“Both of you stop talking,” Tony said tersely.

Loki bit back a laugh.

“You’re not helping either, Liam,” Tony said.

“We are conserving my strength,” Loki said leisurely. He was sitting in the back of the tiny submarine and taking up more space than he absolutely needed to. This was partly to irritate them and partly because sitting as though he had all the space in the world helped him remember he was not trapped here.

He hadn’t realized that his time as Thanos’ prisoner, and the torture he’d endured while in that small, dark cell, had left a mark on him, until they climbed into the submarine. Every passing minute strengthened the urge to shatter it to pieces, just to convince himself he was not trapped here. He bit down on the impulse. Now was not the time to succumb to his reckless nature.

Pietro was juggling nineteen marbles, hands moving faster than Loki could track. Every time he’d tried to add a twentieth, he lost the rhythm and dropped them all and had to spend several cursing minutes picking them up again. He’d been at it for hours and was slowly driving the rest of them mad, though at least the irritation was a distraction from the cramped space. Loki had already decided to enchant the marbles to roll away from Pietro’s fingers if it happened again.

“How much longer do we have to sit here?” Pietro groused.

“It’ll be longer if you keep distracting me from getting past firewalls the Pentagon would drool over,” Tony snapped.

Maria rolled her eyes and thumped backwards against the curved interior wall of the sub.

Pietro dropped his marbles.

“Oh, for god’s sake,” Maria snapped. Tony closed his eyes for a long second.

He swore in a language Loki didn’t recognize and scrambled after them.

Loki flicked his fingers. The marbles began twitching out of Pietro’s grasp every time he reached for one in a matter that could be dismissed as the instability of the sub.

After three minutes of nothing, even with his enhanced speed, Pietro finally caught on. “Loki—”
Loki grinned at him. “Hmm?”

Pietro glared.

“No more juggling,” Loki said, and cast aside the spell.

“I’ll juggle if I feel like it,” Pietro snapped, grabbing the nearest three marbles.

“No you won’t,” Maria said.

“Or I’ll shave off that pretty hair of yours,” Loki added.

“You’d have to catch me first,” Pietro retorted.

Loki raised an eyebrow. “I have. Several times, if memory serves.”

“You think I haven’t learned from the experience?” Pietro challenged.

Loki supposed even he was susceptible to irritation and boredom beyond his capacity to resist after seven hours in the confines of such a tight space, because he leaned forward with every intention of taking Pietro up on his challenge. This would be an excellent way to release some tension.

Things might have escalated if Tony hadn’t spun around. “No bickering, kids, or I’ll take away your Happy Meal toys. I got it. We have a four-minute window to dock, get in, and send the sub off.”

Pietro and Maria both popped up to their feet. Pietro slammed his head on the ceiling and rubbed it with a scowl, remembering to duck. Maria shoved past him to the controls and got the submarine moving with a *thrum* from its engines.

“Remind me why we have to *send away* our vehicle?” Pietro said.

“Because they’ll realize something’s wrong if they see a submarine the size of a Volkswagen van clamped onto their building like a leech?” Tony suggested.

“It was a rhetorical question!”

Maria glared at them over her shoulder. “Can we not bicker like six-year-olds for five minutes?”

“You insult six-year-olds,” Loki said mildly.

Tony and Pietro snorted. Maria rolled her eyes, but there was a smile tugging at her lips as she turned back around.

“Everyone geared up?” Tony asked.

Pietro rolled his neck. A few popping sounds echoed inside the submarine. *Melodramatic.* “Not like I’ve got lots of gear to put on.” He wore the simple long-sleeved torso-only thermosuit Tony had created, simple running pants, and the extremely cleverly designed running shoes. Geared for speed and aerodynamics. This time, he also wore a flat backpack with energy bars in the bottom and canisters of compressed water in the top.

“Loki?”

“I am ready,” Loki said. He was coming to appreciate the Midgardian battle garb more with every use. The vest was practical and cut down on the energy he had to put into wards and interdimensional storage for extra weapons. He used a significant amount of human weapons on
missions like this to disguise precisely how powerful he really was, and also to save his strength for any last-minute disasters. For this situation, he had opted for a number of daggers, both throwing and handheld, concealed all over his body. He murmured a few spell-words and called up the illusion of Liam Hillworth.

“Docking in three… two… one… and here,” Maria said, as the submarine settled against something with a *thump*.

*I will get out of here. I am not trapped in this submarine. I can leave anytime I choose.* Loki focused on Natasha, Steve, James, Clint, and Wanda in their cells—Wanda, in those sadistically clever restraints. They were the only thing keeping him locked in here.

Tony squinted at him. “You good, voodoo man?”

“Don’t call me that,” Loki said, and heard an edge in his own voice.

“Message received. Backing off now,” Tony said, raising an eyebrow.

Loki looked away.

They waited while Maria’s hands flew over the controls.

“The… small space,” Loki said in a very tight voice. “Thanos kept me in a cell. More confined than this. For… longer than was easily endured.”

He didn’t know what compelled him to say it. Perhaps he only did so to garner pity, which made others easier to manipulate. But Tony exhaled, and there was no pity in his eyes, only flat understanding. “For me, it’s sudden loud noises in a calm setting, or people touching me when I wasn’t expecting it,” he said, equally softly.

Pietro was looking at both of them. At Loki in particular.

“Tony, ready for you,” Maria said.

Tony clapped Loki on the shoulder and stepped up beside her.

Loki watched as he tapped a series of commands into the screen at the side of the submarine. “Seals secure,” Friday said, and a hull panel hissed and rolled aside, revealing the damp outer edge of the facility.

“Let’s do this,” Tony said with a hard gleam in his eye, lifting a large black gunlike weapon off the floor and aiming it at the building.

With a subsonic thud, the wide barrel of the weapon emitted some kind of *force*.

Nothing happened.

“You said this would get us in,” Pietro accused. “There’s—”

“Wait for it, zippy,” Tony said, and stepped back into his waiting suit. It swallowed up his limbs and the metal facemask locked into place, eyes gleaming a bright, destructive white.

He hauled off and punched the wall.

With a crunch, the exterior wall of the supposedly unbreachable prison turned to dust. Tony’s fist had gone right through.
He set to work punching out the edges and widening the gap. It was three feet thick and at least four feet wide. The device changed the structure of molecular bonds on some level, as far as Loki understood it, turning solid matter extremely brittle. The effect decreased as Tony moved away from the point of impact, resulting in an irregular four-foot-diameter hole leading into a darkened storage room.

“‘I stand corrected,’” Pietro said, and disappeared through the hole in a flash.

Maria went next, then Loki, and finally Tony.

“‘Friday, protocol seventeen,’” Tony said.

“‘Yes, sir.’”

The internal machinery of the submarine whirred to life. Within seconds, a vaguely opaque film covered the hole.

“You’re sure this will work?” Maria asked.

Tony shrugged. “Pretty sure.”

“Pretty sure?” she said, staring at him. “Have you even tested this?”

Tony grinned. “Nope.”

“Oh my God,” Maria said.

With a clunk, the submarine withdrew from the side of the building, acting on autopilot.

The translucent shield held.

“Okay, let’s go before this thing stops proving Tony right,” Maria said.

Loki eased open the door, cleared the hallway beyond, and led the way, casting wards around them to render them invisible to the cameras’ eyes.

He and Darcy had scouted this entrance point during their tour as rarely frequented and marked it on her StarkPad, along with several others. Tony had selected this after using a hacked British satellite to examine the waters around the facility, as well as a remote probe run by Friday for the patrol schedules, and calculated a four-minute window between submarine sweeps to breach the outer wall.

Friday had used recordings taken during Darcy and Loki’s tour to create blueprints of the facility, and determine where to go. Loki and Tony were to descend to the incarceration level—Loki had a difficult time not thinking of it as a dungeon, as they would say on Asgard. Maria and Pietro would make their way to the command center and use Friday plus a virus Tony had written to work on an override from that end, while Tony hacked it from below. Maria had suggested that Tony go to the command center and he’d given her a decisive “no” in response. Loki suspected that he needed to see for himself that his teammates were freed, but whatever the reason, something in Tony’s voice had stopped Maria from questioning, though she hadn’t looked happy.

They separated at one of the stairwells with silent nods. Loki flexed his fingers and traced runes on his legs as they walked, casting small, low-power spells that would keep them hidden from the cameras. He was still hesitant to use too much strength, so Maria and Pietro had no seidr protection from the cameras, though they also had far less distance to traverse.
Tony and Loki kept to the back ways of the building, but the farther they descended, the more difficult it became, until Tony finally elbowed Loki. “Time,” he said softly.

Loki nodded and whispered a quick spell. The green glow of his seidr flared and both himself and Tony adopted the guises of soldiers in full United Nations gear.

―Ready,‖ he murmured, and they slipped out of their alcove, not three minutes before they began passing groups of UN troops, scientists, and other staff.

Loki sifted through their minds with quick, fleeting touches as he passed, minimizing his power expenditure but gathering impressions of their current mental states. Relaxed. Brisk. Curious about himself and Tony in some cases. Confident, even smug. A few had undertones of worry or uncertainty that he suspected had something to do with imprisoning five members of the Avengers plus a terrifying and notorious assassin eight floors below.

Tony was uncharacteristically quiet.

―Will you be able to bring down the safeguards?‖ Loki said after several floors. “You do not seem… at your best.”

―Worry about yourself,‖ Tony snapped.

Loki didn’t comment.

Tony huffed a breath a few steps later. Loki smirked—the man never could remain quiet. Silence was such a useful tactic in general to find more information, but it was particularly potent with Tony Stark. “I’ll admit I’m not at my best. I… this is my fault, and it’s—hard to deal with that. But I don’t have a choice.”

Loki nodded slowly. He understood that, at least.

Tony nodded at a trio of scientists in passing when they greeted him as a general. “I’m still not used to that.”

―People being polite to you?‖ Loki said.

―You think you’re so funny,‖ Tony said.

―I know so.‖

They found the next stairwell and continued down. Four floors away from the incarceration level.

―We’ll get them out,‖ Loki said.

Tony glanced at him sideways. “You’re… confident in this plan?”

―I would not be here otherwise.‖

Tony didn’t respond, but his step seemed ever so slightly lighter.

The first security checkpoint for the incarceration level came into view. They’d passed through these less than twenty-four hours ago when Ross first led them down here. Loki and Maria had both been careful to analyze the systems from a tactical standpoint, since Darcy and Vision had little to no training in infiltrations and Tony was too distracted to care. They’d argued for hours about how exactly they were going to get in, and finally settled on only one workable plan.
“Ready?” Tony asked in a low voice.

Loki nodded, half-aware that his fingers were automatically flexing as he prepared the spells he’d need if this went wrong.

They got closer.

One of the three bored-looking guards at the checkpoint stood up. He took in the uniforms Loki had given himself and Tony and his eyes went wide. He saluted. “General, uh…”

“Price,” Tony said as the other two guards leaped to attention. “And Corporal Lane. We’re here on United Nations business.”

“What… business?” the guard said, still looking back and forth between them, eyes wide.

Loki twisted his hand below the guard’s sight line, casting a quick spell to ease suspicion.

“I’m afraid that’s classified,” Tony said. Loki tweaked the illusion to add a forbidding, almost cruel cast to the expression of Tony’s illusion that the man’s actual face couldn’t quite achieve.

“Of course, sir,” a second guard said quickly. “Identification, please?”

“Your palmprint scanners will be sufficient,” Tony said. The arrogance in his voice was all his own. Loki bit back a smirk.

“Right this way, sir.”

The first guard tapped away at the station for a few seconds, and the scanner on top of the table turned blue. Waiting.

Tony subtly pushed a button on his watch and stepped up to the scanner, laying his hand flat on it.

This was the part Loki liked the least. When he had examined the security measures, he’d discovered technology in the system that severely limited his ability to influence it as he had once done to JARVIS and the Avengers Tower firewalls to alter his genetic data. Similar technology was installed at the Tower as well, though different enough that Loki knew Tony was honest in saying he’d never sold anything of the kind to the UN. Someone, somewhere, had discovered how to partially nullify Loki’s seidr, at least in regards to their digital system. Which left them only the Midgardian way.

Loki didn’t like relying on Tony’s devices. The man was a genius, but he was a genius with fewer than fifty years of experience, as opposed to over one thousand.

But the scanner beeped and turned green.

Tony’s shoulders relaxed just a fraction, and he stepped through.

Loki copied him, gave a stiff nod to the soldiers, and followed Tony down the hall. He kept his attention on the soldiers’ minds until they were out of sight, searching for any more suspicion, but he found none.

“We’re clear,” he said softly.

“One down, two to go,” Tony said.

The next security checkpoint was only a two-minute walk away. These halls were much busier. Loki heard two people talking in a Midgardian language he thought was Croatian about ‘the enhanced
girl’. Wanda.

He’d put a not-insignificant amount of time into her training and found her an apt apprentice. She learned quickly and well, and had a reserve of power that would one day make her a formidable opponent to any mage, not least because of its singular nature. And he’d come to genuinely like her, as well—as much as he could in such a short time.

But she was down there locked in a cell, tortured. Used for experimentation.

Loki knew what all of those things felt like.

So he paused as they passed.

Reaching out and ready to do—he didn’t know what, exactly. But it was going to be violent and painful.

_Not now._

He checked his own impulsivity and kept moving. Tony didn’t even notice Loki’s momentary lapse.

The second checkpoint passed much like the first.

“Powered up, voodoo man?” Tony said as the third and final checkpoint before the cell block came into sight.

“Do not provoke me,” Loki said. “I may not be at full strength but I have more than adequate power to turn you into something slimy and invertebrate for a few hours.”

“I’m shaking in my boots,” Tony deadpanned.

Loki flicked his fingers. Involuntary tremors raced up and down Tony’s lower legs. When Tony turned to glare at him, Loki gave him a smile that was all teeth and no amity.

“General?” one of the soldiers said uncertainly.

Tony stepped up to talk to him.

Loki bent over and pretended to adjust the laces of his boot. In reality, he was tracing runes on the floor, feeding them a small trickle of _seidr_ as he worked, ignoring Tony’s conversation.

“Done,” he said, standing. “I’m doing this the old-fashioned way. Saving my _seidr_."

“Go for it,” Tony said.

The soldier frowned. “General?”

“Hello,” Loki said, turning the same smile he’d just given Tony on the five soldiers behind the barrier.

Two of them flinched back.

He vaulted over the barrier, knives out, and whirled through them. Letting himself slip his own control, just a bit.

When he was done, there was blood up and down both arms of his tactical gear, and a tiny splatter on his face. None of it his own.
Tony glanced behind himself. “They can’t see us?”

“Everything will look perfectly in order to anyone who doesn’t get within three feet of the security checkpoint,” Loki said, casting aside their personal illusions, glad to be rid of the drain on his power.

Tony climbed over the barrier. His right eyebrow rose at the bodies. “Did you kill them?”

“Three of them,” Loki said, nudging one with his foot. “The others… depending on how long we take, they may or may not receive medical care in time.”

Tony’s eyebrows furrowed slightly.

Loki waited to see what Tony would do.

Tony turned away without a word and started typing away at the security console.

Those deaths had been calculated. Loki personally had no qualms about killing the men. They were soldiers who knew the risks of this career path. He’d taken many lives in his life and these were not the only people who would die in this operation; Loki saw no difference between killing with a knife or killing with an explosion. And they’d been in his way.

He just had not been certain how Tony would react. So he’d staged a brief experiment.

“Maria’s in,” Tony said. “To the overwatch room, I mean. She says… Pietro’s running the perimeter, literally… someone up there suspects something’s off, they may not have much time.” His fingers flew over the keyboard. “I only need five minutes.”

Loki’s head snapped up, his ears detecting raised voices in the more open space out in front of them, which seemed to be a hub for people who worked on this floor.

“We don’t have five minutes,” he said tightly. “Someone passed us in the hallway earlier and inquired of a superior which UN general was visiting today. Said superior quickly realized there is no general on the premises and now there’s a fight starting. If they notice there’s no trace of us on the cameras—”

“Got it,” Tony said. Loki was unsure how, but the pace of his typing actually increased. He began muttering to Maria through the comms, trying to talk her through helping Friday and the virus along from her end.

Frustration began to color his voice two minutes later.

The argument in the lobby had grown louder.

Loki busied himself layering a misdirection spell over the illusion to buy them time. Then he began subtly tracing rune-spells on his legs and arms to be activated with a simple thought, so he wouldn’t have to take the time or effort to cast them later. It was looking more and more like he’d have to improvise and go in on his own. They hadn’t wanted that as the outcome, but if necessary—

“Got it,” Tony said, whirling away from the console. “Thirty seconds to get through the doors as they cycle.”

They ran down the hall, Loki taking care not to outpace Tony too much, as the first set of doors opened, and the next, and the next, and finally the entrance. They could see all the way into the dim cell block.
“Faster,” Loki said. The doors were beginning to close behind them.

Tony pushed himself harder.

Loki knew he could make it alone. But he was faster and stronger than Midgardians, and while Tony was fit and a skilled fighter, he wasn’t a sprinter.

The last door began to close ahead of them. Loki glanced aside. Tony wasn’t going to make it.

*By the Norns*, Loki thought furiously, and adjusted his pace, pulling instantly ahead of Tony.

“Hey!” Tony said. It came out huffy on an exhalation. Loki ignored him.

By the time he burst into the cell block, his teammates were all on their feet looking wary.

“Liam!” Sam said.

Loki whirled around and threw himself against the steel door.

His teeth gritted and he braced one foot against the threshold. For once, he wished for Thor’s strength. If the door closed, he’d have to use *seidr* to rip it off its hinges, and he wanted to waste absolutely none of his power.

The electromagnetic closing mechanism groaned its protest. The pressure increased every second.

Tony hurtled through the gap.

Loki slipped deftly aside.

The door slammed shut with a dull *boom*.

Tony was bent over, panting.

Loki shook his hair out of his face and glared at Tony. “Thirty seconds is *really* all you could manage?”

“Sorry… for not… doing better… in span of… three minutes,” Tony gasped, managing to glare even with his hands on his knees.

“What’s going on?” Steve said.

Loki glanced up at them and raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t you order takeout? I really hope we have the right address—”

Clint snorted and Natasha laughed.

“Okay, that wasn’t my best moment,” Steve said. “What’s the plan?”

Tony was already up and moving, even though his breaths still came heavily. Loki prowled over to the wall where the spy hole waited and reached out with *seidr* while Tony started in on the empty internal command station in the wall by the door. To open the cells, they needed one person inside the cell block and another in the overwatch room to provide identity verification of adequate clearance within ten seconds of one another, which meant they needed a hack running simultaneously in each location. Loki had them concealed from the cameras, but if the spy station was occupied, he’d have to do something about that as well.
And while he could not override the computer systems that controlled the door, the internal mechanics were simple constructs of metal and grease. Those, he could influence.

Something began beeping frantically inside the spy station as the door began to rise.

The spy was a different man this time. Shorter and sweatier. Loki wiped the man’s mind and left him asleep, then closed the door and turned back around.

“Tony,” he said.

The cells remained stubbornly closed.

“They added four more levels of encryption than Friday detected,” Tony said, hands flying desperately over the console. “Virus isn’t equipped for this—gotta handle it myself.”

“Is that even possible?” Natasha asked.

“I’ll make it possible,” Tony growled.

Loki looked to the side.

Steve met his eyes.

Loki drifted over.

Natasha leaned on her bars. “Can’t you just magic the system? We know you did it to the tower network—”

“They’ve some sort of technology that prevents me from influencing the network,” Loki said. “Another design than Tony’s, but the same effect. Your cell doors have electromagnetism flowing through them powered by that system. I cannot deactivate it—Tony must do so from inside the system.” He frowned, an idea forming. “As it happens… I suspect this technology was recovered from Hydra files found after SHIELD fell. They should not have the expertise to do this without assistance of some kind.”

“Puzzle it out later. This goes south, you get him out,” Steve said in a low voice. Tony, on the other side of the room, couldn’t hear.

“If this goes south, I’m getting you all out,” Loki said darkly. “We’re trying to conserve my seidr, as I would rather not drag the lot of us through eight separate holes in the space-time continuum and leave Ross to puzzle out how exactly we all simply disappeared, but if I have to, I will bring this building down around his ears.”

“You can do that?” Sam said.

James glared at Sam. “He left handprints on a steel door.”

Loki looked at the door. It was true—there were indentations where he’d gripped its edge.

“There’s a difference between a door and an entire damn prison complex,” Sam retorted.

“Yes, I can do that, but I do not want to,” Loki said, heading off the argument. They didn’t have time for squabbles. Though normally he would have thrown fuel to the fire in the form of a well-timed and seemingly innocuous comment. A little chaos and strife had yet to bring down any empires.

“Please don’t dump me on some frozen planet,” Clint said. “Seriously, I don’t do well with cold.”
“You’re an assassin,” Natasha said. “You can handle some cold.”

“I can, doesn’t mean I like it!”

Tony stumbled back from the console with an undignified sound.

“Imitating birds now?” James said. “That’s Wilson’s area of expertise, Tony.”

Sam stuck his arms through the bars and presented both of his middle fingers in the direction of James’ cell. “Barnes, I swear to—”

“Easy, girls, you’re both pretty,” Natasha said.

Clint coughed on a laugh.

“Tony?” Steve said.

Loki made it to Tony’s side just as he recovered.

“Hey, it’s Agent,” Tony said. “Long time no see. You look pretty good for a corpse.”

On the screen of the console, Phil Coulson grinned up at them.

Loki raised an eyebrow and looked at Steve, projecting his voice to Steve and Natasha’s ears alone. “Does he know about me?”

Natasha nodded, shrugging unapologetically.

Loki stepped into the field of the camera’s view. “Hello again, Agent Coulson.”

Coulson gave him an impressively unreadable look. “Loki. Green eyes suit you better than blue.”

Loki let his smile show, only slightly. He could appreciate the subtle workings of this man’s mind.

“Yeah, we think so too,” Tony said. “Care to explain why I got a video call on this extremely secure console?”

“Oh, I’m on the other one,” Coulson said. He stepped back, and Maria nodded at them, unable to conceal what could only be described as delight. “See, I have a problem.”

Tony did something to the side of the console. Coulson’s face instantly came up as a projection on the wall. “I have a memorized list of enhanced children from all around the world,” he said.

Steve made a noise. Loki remembered this—Natasha had relayed this information to Darcy from the escape pod before they landed in Quebec.

“I also gave a copy to Agent Melinda May.”

Clint straightened. “I met her once. Badass lady.”

“She’s dead.”

Loki checked the time. Tight, but not yet urgent. “Explain.”

“Hydra got her, too. She killed herself rather than let herself be taken, but they managed to backtrace her movements and find where she hid the list. Forty people under about twenty are on there. This was only a week ago.” He took a deep breath. Loki narrowed his eyes—he detected a certain
discomfort in the agent’s bearing.

“You gave the list to the United Nations,” he said. “To try and help those children.”

Coulson looked at Loki appraisingly. “Got it in one. Except their version of protecting is pretty damn similar to their idea of how to deal Avengers going off the rails.”

“You mean—they’ve imprisoned those kids?” When Loki glanced back, Clint’s hands were fists around the bars of his cell. Natasha and James’ faces were coldly furious; Steve looked like he was about to throw something if only all the furniture in his cell wasn’t bolted down.

“On the level below yours,” Coulson said. “Plus three more—girl named Zina and her brothers. I’m told you know them.”

“Motherfuckers!” Clint shouted, slapping the bars.

“How’d you know how to find us?” Natasha demanded, glaring at him with suspicious eyes.

“I knew you’d come for your teammates,” Coulson said, mainly to Tony, but his eyes strayed to Loki. “And that you’d need someone here as well as in the cells. The UN trusts me—I’ve been a paragon of cooperation. I can get you out, and you’re going to take those kids with you.”

“Maria?” Tony said.

“Trust him,” Maria said without hesitation.

“Can we get those cells open without him?” James said.

Tony looked at him, eyes flickering, and shook his head.

James looked at Steve, across the cell block.

Steve glanced at Loki.

Somewhat flattered, Loki watched Coulson for a long moment. It was more difficult with a screen between them, but he saw no flicker—nothing but steady honesty. Nothing to indicate a lie or manipulation.

“I believe him,” he said.

Steve nodded once. “Do it.”

Coulson looked at Tony. “Password’s A997AVE. Can you get the rest from your side if you start with that?”

Tony was already back to typing. “Yep. You good?”

“Cover my tracks,” Coulson said. “You’ll want a man on the inside.”

“Step ahead of you, walking dead.”

Coulson frowned.

“He does it to everyone, ignore him,” Maria said. “Tony, can we—”

“I’m good, don’t need you,” Tony said absently.
Loki looked at her. “Go attempt to procure a means of transportation large enough for all of us plus forty-three passengers. Obviously our original plan won’t work—we will have to meet you in the submarine bay from inside the building. Be ready when we get there.”

“Pietro?” Maria said.

He blurred in a second later. “Hall’s clear still.”

Coulson, who Loki knew had not missed that Maria was willing to take orders from Loki, raised a hand half-mockingly into the air. “I can help with transport.”

“Coulson,” Steve called.

Coulson paused, halfway offscreen.

“Thank you.”

Coulson grinned. “Of course.”

He vanished, and the call died.

The cells opened seconds later. Natasha and James burst from theirs like caged wolves.

Loki went straight for Wanda’s.

She looked at him, barely moving even her eyes. The trembling was fainter now, but constant.

He didn’t bother to quell the green sparks snapping around his hands as he reached out and wrapped them around the collar. It hissed and broke apart into several dozen pieces within seconds. He set about tearing the straitjacket off her.

Clint was there on her other side as soon as her trembling hands pushed the last of the pieces away. He and Loki helped her stand. “You good?” Clint asked.

Wanda nodded. Fear and anger warred in her haunted eyes.

“Did you hear all that?” Clint said.

“Yes,” she whispered, and glanced at her feet as they walked back out into the main cell block. “There’s more children…”

Natasha, Clint, and James found a storage locker, and began pulling gear out of it. “Rogers,” Natasha called, and tossed him his shield.

“How do we get down to the next floor?” Tony said. “Our exit’s kind of compromised.”

Loki felt Wanda’s power surge. Unlike his, it was at full strength—potentially even enough to overpower him at the moment. And as the fear and dread and anxiety and uncertainty of the last few days wore off—as she began to process the fact that she was free once more—he saw her anger rising. Anger she’d kept tightly locked down just so she could survive here.

She was about to explode.

“I would recommend standing back,” Loki said, as Wanda’s eyes began to glow red.

The others caught on quickly and retreated to the edges of the room. He noted that none of them was
willing to step back behind the doors of the cells, and could not blame them.

Wanda held her hands out in front of her at shoulder height, elbows slightly bent.

Energy flared, crackling across Loki’s skin in a dance only he could feel.

She slammed both hands down to the floor.

There was a crunch.

A twenty-foot-wide circle of concrete disintegrated, dropping her through in a shower of dust.

Natasha, James, Clint, and Loki followed her through in an instant. Wanda somewhat shakily climbed to her feet—she’d rolled on the landing—and took in their surroundings.

Loki found himself swallowing back shock.

*Cells*. These were *children*, inhabiting actual *cells*. Granted, they were more spacious than those above, and had actual beds with doors to the bathrooms, and appeared to have been given some amenities like video games and books and televisions, but…

He’d once been ostracized for his *seidr* on a realm that supposedly valued mages. He didn’t want that to happen on Midgard as well.

The cells were spaced out in a circle—two levels of them. The center atrium was much larger than the middle of the cell block above, and it appeared that at least several cells on the second level were unoccupied. Five unconscious security personnel lay around the room, but the children had remained immune behind the glass fronts of their rooms.

Wanda went to work. All the glass shattered.

Steve and Tony joined them just in time to see the first few kids venture out of their cells.

“Gotta say, this isn’t my usual audience, but I’ll work with it. Loki, make them understand English in case they don’t,” Tony said. Loki murmured a spell and nodded.

Tony raised his voice. “Ah, hi everyone—you probably know me. I’m Tony Stark, also known as Iron Man. The United Nations appears to be making some really shitty decisions lately, so we’re here to bust out our teammates and also all of you. If anyone wants to stay behind, no harm no foul and I won’t judge—much—but I promise wherever we go next, you won’t be prisoners. Who’s coming?”

There was a heavy pause.

“We’re short on time,” Steve said commandingly. “Either come or stay, but choose now. Language barriers aren’t a problem, by the way, as you’ve probably noticed”

A boy of perhaps twelve or thirteen Midgardian years pointed. “You’re… You’re Loki,” he said in accented English.

“I am,” Loki agreed.

“Didn’t you try to take over Earth?” someone else called.

He grinned. “Planetary conquests are *so* last year.”

Natasha snorted. At least several of the kids stifled laughter.
There was another pause.

“Clint Barton.”

Clint spun around. “Zina,” he said. “I—you’re all right?”

“You promised once to take care of my brothers and me,” the girl said slowly. Loki did a quick count—all forty of the imprisoned, who clearly did hail from all over the planet, had gathered on the lower level, and were paying Zina close attention. He recognized the girl and her brothers, who stuck close to her colorful skirt, from surveillance footage of Lagos. “Did you know we were here?”

“Not until five minutes ago,” Clint said.

“Will you honor your promise now?”

“Of course,” Clint said. He glanced at the group, and Loki knew he was aware of the attention on him. “I never intended to let you down. In fact, I was under the impression I was talking to you on the phone about once a week.”

“Voice imitation software,” Tony said darkly. “It’s not exactly cutting-edge.”

Zina considered them for several seconds. Her gaze lingered longest on Loki. He raised an eyebrow and offered no explanation for his presence.

“I will come,” she said.

It was the tipping point. One by one, the rest of the group agreed as well. Loki watched carefully and saw they seemed to automatically respect three children—a young man of about seventeen with spiky hair and narrow, angular eyes, a short round girl with bright red hair and glasses, and a tall, gangly boy whose face seemed predisposed to smiling.

“Great,” Sam said, and looked at Tony. “How are we getting out of here?”

Tony grinned. They weren’t in the clear yet, but having his teammates out of prison seemed to have flipped a switch inside him. Loki much preferred this version. “You’re going to love this.”

He raised an arm and theatrically pressed the face of his watch.

Nothing happened.

James shifted. “Was that supposed to d—”

A siren went off.

“Pressure breach at level seventeen. Pressure breach at level eighteen. Pressure breach at level three,” an automated voice droned, and kept listing different levels.

Tony grinned. “While we’ve been down here, Vision’s been taking the other sub around in circles, drilling holes in the facility with my newest toy and also the glowy death stone in his head, then leaving them sealed. I just remotely shattered all the seals.” He patted his watch.

“Tall people help the short people,” Sam shouted, beckoning the group of kids, some of whom were beginning to look genuinely excited. “Let’s start running.”

In the chaos, it was shockingly simple.
While Loki knew the lumbering bureaucracy of the United Nations probably had protocols for everything from reanimated corpse armies to dolphins suddenly forming a sentient anti-pollution coalition, their people were woefully unprepared for a seal breach of this magnitude, and so were the systems that compartmentalized areas that had pressure failures—which Loki had managed to discover were far from fully operational while touring with Darcy. Vision’s breach locations were strategically chosen to leave a path more or less unflooded from the cell levels up to the submarine bay two floors below sea level, where Maria and Pietro would be waiting. They simply ran, a horde of children thundering up stairs and around corners and down hallways while Steve, James, Sam, and Clint covered the rear and Wanda, Loki, Tony, and Natasha led the way. Friday guided them through the building. Soldiers ran in panicked circles, alarms blared, sirens wailed, and people shouted and fired guns when they ran by, but Wanda and at least two of the children in the pack cast shields to deflect the bullets while the other Avengers took the soldiers down.

And all the while, elation howled in Loki’s blood.

This was his element. Chaos of his own making, chaos he could manipulate. When everything was falling apart, opportunities abounded. He tried not to kill the soldiers without cause, but neither did he hold back. Natasha, Wanda, and Tony seemed to share this philosophy.

One floor after another passed. Loki’s tactical gear was slick with blood, his knives dripped red as he ran, and he was distantly aware that a faint, savage smile was twisting his lips and the thin silvery scars that crossed them.

He tried to protect the children from seeing the worst of it.

They were only two floors down from the submarine bay when Wanda suddenly skidded to a halt.

Temporarily, they were alone—most of the soldiers were evacuating in the emergency pods, and Loki and James and Natasha had just finished tearing through a small squad who’d opened up submachine gun fire at the children. (Those soldiers had all died, few of them cleanly.)

“What?” Tony gasped, wild-eyed but still looking better.

“Soldiers,” Wanda said in a low voice. “Around the corner, through a door. Lots of them. Ross is there, too.”

“Is there an alternate route?” Natasha asked.

The children shuffled and murmured.

Steve pushed his way through them. “Excuse me, excuse me, sorry—what’s going on?”

Wanda explained while Tony examined his StarkPad and discussed it with Friday. Loki took the break to wipe first his palms and then the hilts of his blades on his pants. Blood was making his grip slightly difficult.

“Alternate route’s about five minutes longer,” Tony announced. “And if we don’t come running through there, Ross will probably change his plan.”

Steve looked down the hall. “Diversion? I can go in and distract him while you all keep going.”

“Don’t you dare play martyr, Rogers,” Sam snapped.

“If it’s the only way—”
“I can stay with him,” Wanda said. “I can get us out.”

Steve looked at her.

“You’re sure?” Sam asked.

Wanda nodded.

Natasha glanced at Loki.

He cast an assessing glance over Wanda. Her trembles were gone, and he could sense she was nowhere near tapped out of energy—she’d grown more precise, more controlled as they trained.

“Yes,” he said at last. “A solid shield,” he instructed, “just like we practiced. Remember to keep it airtight as well as resistant to solid projectiles, and it must be two-way force to hold Steve in, as he will not hover as you do. Home in on my energy and use the submarine’s airlock.”

“I’m going with them,” James said flatly. Loki wasn’t sure when he’d joined the group at the front.

Tony opened his mouth.

“We don’t have time to argue,” Natasha said. “Wanda, get them out alive. Tony, lead the way. I’ll switch to rear guard.” She vanished back down the hall without leaving space for argument.

Steve looked at Tony. “If we don’t make it back… thanks for coming,” he said.

Pain flickered in Tony’s eyes when he glanced at James, but something else as well. He turned his gaze back to Steve. “Wouldn’t be the same in the tower without our resident senior citizens,” he said.

“And here I thought you’d be serious for five seconds,” Steve said.

Tony grinned. “Your mistake, not mine.”

“See you on the other side,” Steve said, and then he took off in the direction they’d meant to go, James and Wanda on his heels.

Tony glanced at his StarkPad. “This way.”

Chapter End Notes

And here we depart at last from canon! Up until now I’ve been using fragments of different movies, usually out of order, but no more. I’m hoping I can bash out the end of this thing before Ragnarok comes out. (I’m so excited for that movie it’s not even funny)
Chapter 172

[Classified Location], United Nations Avengers Task Force Headquarters and Maximum Security Containment Facility

May 2012

Steve pushed the door open and ignored the fifty-odd guns aimed at his chest.

“Secretary,” he said coldly, stepping inside.

Wanda and Bucky stayed on his flanks. Little pulses of something, like a stiff, focused breeze, grazed Steve’s arm and leg nearest Wanda. He let himself be reassured by their presence.

“Rogers,” Ross said. “I have to ask you to return peacefully to your cells.”

Bucky scoffed. “Not gonna happen.”

“Then we’re going to have to take more severe action,” Ross said grimly. “I was willing to compromise with you—”

“Compromise?” Steve said, taking a reflexive step forward. “Compromise? Your version of compromise is locking us up for days, torturing a twenty-year-old woman for resisting unfair arrest, denying us the right to a fair trial—”

“If you operate outside the law, you can’t expect to benefit from it either,” Ross snapped.

Steve was so stunned by this he actually couldn’t speak for a moment.

“You imbecile ,” Wanda snarled, shifting. A number of the guns turned on her but she paid them no mind. “I may have been born in Sokovia, but you’re less American than I am if you believe anyone who breaks the law forfeits their human rights.”


“Or, hey, how about the Geneva Convention? I was technically not me for this but I’m pretty sure there’s something in there about torture,” Bucky said.

“And what you did to Tony.” Steve’s fists clenched. All his life he’d worked so hard to only lose his temper when he wanted to—to always be in control. At first it was because he was a skinny kid who couldn’t afford to pick fights unless he had a reason. Then it was because he had the eyes and hopes and lives of hundreds of millions of people on him and he couldn’t afford to be anything but their icon. Since the ice, it had been because he was navigating a new world, a new time, with new friends and allies and incarnations of his enemies, and losing your temper was a good way to open yourself up to manipulation. He prided himself on his self-control.

And it was about to slip.

“What I did to your dear friend Tony?” Ross sneered. “Stark’s a fool. I’d hoped he wouldn’t pull something like this, but—you’ll all pay for what you’ve done to this facility. For flouting international law.”

“International law used to be nothing but treaties between states,” Steve said flatly. “No organization had the power to tell countries how they should legislate within their own borders. Now it’s this
complicated mess. You think *we’re* the problem here? Take a look at your own system.” He shook his head. “I tried to believe in it, I really did. You broke that when you threw us in cells and put a collar on Wanda. When you locked forty-three innocent children up for no reason other than they have powers they didn’t choose.”

Ross flinched.

“Oh, didn’t know we found them?” Bucky said, shifting his grip threateningly on the assault rifle he’d grabbed off a fallen soldier on the way. “That little pet project’s done now, too.”

“We’d apologize, but we’re really not sorry,” Wanda said.

Steve glanced at her. Wondering if they’d bought the others enough time yet. Wondering whether he should shoot Ross before they left. Or, more accurately, whether he should let Wanda or Bucky do it, since they both seemed about ready to tear him apart in pieces.

“I’m going to ask you one more time,” Ross said. He didn’t seem to have the sense to look afraid. “Stand. Down.”

Steve shook his head and swung his shield off his back.

A phone started to ring.

Ross, looking supremely irritated, began patting down his pockets. He yanked the phone out, red-faced, and held it to his ear. “I don’t know who you are or how you got this number but you need to explain *right now*—”

His face turned an alarming shade of puce.

“This is ridiculous,” he began, and then stopped again. Steve heard tinny unintelligible words coming from the speaker. Whoever was on the other end was *not* happy.

Ross glared at Steve with a whole new level of hate. Back at you, asshole.

“Stop talking,” he said, and tossed the phone.

Steve caught it out of reflex, and gave Ross a wary examination before slowly raising the phone to his ear. “Hello?”

“Stevie, hey.”

“Darcy?”

“The one and only,” she said cheerfully, like they were meeting up for lunch. Steve was having trouble wrapping his brain around this. “I just heard from Tony, and—”

“How—what—”

“Stop talking.” Darcy said. “I got Friday to hook me up to Ross’ cell, no way he’s tapping his own phones, so this is off books. Only way I could get to you. Tony says they’ve got the sub and he’s having Vision damage the foundations to distract them while we escape, so be ready, and also I told Ross I’m trying to talk you into going back to your cell so he doesn’t have proof I’m in on this whole scheme, so look pissed.”

That wasn’t hard. Steve was beyond pissed, just not with Darcy. He let some of that show on his face. “No, I won’t stand down!” he shouted.
Darcy snickered. “Oh god, I should’ve had him give Bucky the phone. Long story short, you have like three more minutes and then that whole place is going to hell, and I need you to not kill Ross. Publicity shit, I’m not happy about it, but if he turns into a martyr my job’s gonna get a lot harder.”

Steve scrambled for something else to say. “No, you don’t understand.”

“That was even worse than the first time. I’m glad you’re not in a cell. Don’t die. Darcy out.”

She hung up the phone.

Steve had to bite back a smile as he tossed it back to Ross. *Ross can’t die*, he thought hard at Wanda, hoping the message would get through.

She nodded subtly.

“I take it you wouldn’t listen to her,” Ross said.

*Tell Bucky if you can.* Another subtle nod.

Steve shrugged at Ross. “How’d she even convince you to give me the phone?”

Ross looked uncomfortable. “She asked.”

“Really,” Bucky drawled.

“Last chance. Stand down or we open fire.”

Steve had an idea. He looked at Bucky.

“Whatever you just thought of, don’t fucking do it,” Bucky hissed.

Steve opened his arms up wide, shield still on his left forearm, leaving him completely unprotected. “Go ahead. Shoot.”

Wanda started to move. He waved at her to hold off. Just for a second. He had a point to prove.

No one shot.

“No one? Not even you, Secretary? Oh, wait—it’s Chairman now, my bad.” Steve let his arms fall to his sides. “We’ll be going now.”

A gun fired.

Wanda, who’d been focused on Steve, wasn’t quite fast enough to protect herself. It punched into her side and she collapsed with a gasp.

Steve didn’t hesitate to launch himself forward. Bucky was right there with him, as he’d known would be the case.

Fifty soldiers in a cramped space. No room for shots taken from above. Versus the two of them.

“Piece of cake,” Steve grunted, slaming his shield into one soldier’s stomach and shooting two more until his stolen handgun ran out. He tossed it aside. Grabbed another.

Bucky snapped someone’s neck before he could shoot Steve. “Just like old times.”

Duck. Shield cover. Watch Bucky’s six. Trust his own to Bucky. Steve was halfway through the
fight when he realized he was enjoying this. Enjoying being out of that cage, enjoying the adrenaline of the fight, enjoying the fear in the UN soldiers’ eyes as they faced him and his best friend.

The last twelve soldiers were in squad formation when Steve and Bucky lined up in front of them.

There was a tense pause.

A man in the front of the squad dropped his gun and raised his hands. Slowly, one by one, his fellows followed suit.

“Good decision,” Steve said.

“Your boss could learn a thing or two from you guys,” Bucky muttered.

Steve elbowed him. “Turn around, walk to the wall, and kneel in front of it.”

The soldiers all did as he asked.

Bucky jogged over to Wanda.

She was sitting up slowly. Red light gleamed over the bullet wound, and there was a lot less blood than Steve had expected. Somehow, she was making a force-field bandage for her own gunshot wound.

“You still good to get us out?” Steve asked.

Wanda winced but nodded, climbing to her feet. “Ross?”

“Alive,” Steve said, gesturing behind him at three dozen soldiers lying on the ground, injured or unconscious or dead, and another twelve kneeling against the wall, and Ross slowly climbing to his feet, covered in dust and bruises. His nose was bleeding and he looked crazed, but at least he had enough sense not to attack them.

Wanda lifted her hands.

“You don’t deserve that shield!” Ross shouted, glaring at Steve. He staggered but stayed upright.

“You’re no more a hero than any of the people you’ve taken down!”

Steve looked over his shoulder at Ross. “If you’re the leader of the good guys, I don’t think I want to be the hero anymore,” he said, and then an explosion rocked the building beneath him and Wanda clenched her fists and a red bubble of power appeared around the three of them, carrying them aside and smashing through one wall after another until they slipped away into the quiet dark of the ocean.
Chapter 173

[Classified Location], Traveling

May 2012

“So… where do we put them?”

Clint blinked and looked up. “Huh?”

“The kids,” Natasha said, poking him in the shoulder. “What do we do with them?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“You’re the only person on this sub who likes children.”

“I like children,” Wanda said, lowering herself into a seat next to Clint with a wince.

Natasha gave her a look.

“In theory,” Wanda amended.

“I like them in practice too,” Pietro said, following his sister into the mess hall. “Is there food? I need food.”

“Sandwiches on the counter,” Clint said. “You’re welcome.”

Pietro made a beeline for the food. Clint had raided the kitchen—no, galley, this was a sub—as soon as they disappeared into deep water and could consider themselves safe from the UN. Tony and Natasha had already dragged Loki through to help them carry mass quantities of Clint’s cobbled-together meal down to the storage bay, which had been the only space large enough to fit forty-three people. Clint expected they were currently occupied trying to explain why some of the Avengers had been in prison and why Loki was working with them instead of dead or in a prison somewhere. He decided to let Tony and the others handle that explanation—he needed food, and the windows in here to remind him that he wasn’t trapped anymore.

It had not been a pleasant few days.

He still remembered Wanda’s furious screams that turned to pain as they pinned her arms and locked the collar around her neck. He still remembered gripping the bars so hard his knuckles turned white and his bones ached. He still remembered listening to Bucky’s panicked, light breathing for an hour until he calmed down.

“Clint?” Natasha said.

He blinked and looked up at her. Realized he’d been staring moodily at his plate, and grinned. “Present.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment.

He wondered how she was doing. Tasha, who hated being caged—who’d spent years as a puppet, years more cutting herself free of her strings, and she wouldn’t have handled it any better than he did.

Instead, he turned to Wanda. “How’re you holding up?”
“Maria and Steve patched me up,” Wanda said. “Nothing vital was hit, and the bullet went all the way through. I was lucky.”

“How’d you even let a bullet hit you?” Pietro said. “I felt that. Ran into a wall so hard I almost knocked myself out. Maria was so surprised she about shot me.”

“I was focused on Steve,” Wanda said, picking at her sandwich.

“And I’m sure he’s very grateful, but it’s okay to watch out for yourself, too,” Clint said.

She offered him a half smile that, while faint, seemed genuine. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Stay on track,” Natasha said, kicking Clint under the table. “Where are we going to put forty kids while we fight in a war?”

He looked at Pietro. “Did Coulson have any suggestions?”

“Bow, huh hub oo un,” Pietro said.

Wanda gave him a withering look. “You’re disgusting.”

Pietro swallowed a large bite of sandwich. “I said, no, he had to run. Tony hid his involvement from the cameras and the computers, but he couldn’t be seen anywhere near us.”

Clint considered.

“The Tower’s off limits for all of us now, isn’t it?” Wanda said softly.

“Afraid so,” Natasha said. “Darcy and Jane are moving the others out as we speak, if they haven’t already left. Tony hid all his digital files before we came here. We’re meeting up at a safe house in Pennsylvania.”

“Pennsylvania…” Clint muttered.

Tasha raised an eyebrow.

“I might know a place,” he said. “But it’s… kinda complicated. I’ll need to make a few phone calls.”

Natasha stood. “Come on, we can use the comms array in the—”

Maria walked in. Her stride faltered just a fraction when she took in Wanda, Pietro, and Natasha. “Any sandwiches left?”


Wanda had the good sense not to argue when Natasha used that tone of voice. Clint tried not to laugh—it was the same talk-smack-and-you’ll-get-smacked tone his unofficial adoptive mother, Kara, who’d basically mothered anyone younger than thirty in the circus he joined, used all the time. Not that he’d ever tell Natasha she sounded like a fifty-year-old secretary.

Pietro, though—he opened his mouth to protest.

Wanda shot him a look.

He closed it and followed them out, grabbing two more sandwiches on the way.
Maria half smiled. “Not very subtle, is she?”

“You know as well as I do subtle’s her default,” Clint said. “I think she thinks it’s funny to be blunt like that.”

“True…” Maria drifted over, grabbed the last sandwich, and sat down, but she didn’t start eating. Clint reached across the table and touched her wrist lightly. “What’s wrong?”

“We haven’t talked about this. Not really,” she said quietly. “About… what we want out of this mess. Where we think this is going.”

“And whether you still want to be a part of it?” he guessed.

Her lips tightened.

Something in Clint’s chest ached. “Maria—”

“Let me explain,” she said. “I… I like what we were doing. Before. The… helping people. Taking down criminals the world’s governments couldn’t, or wouldn’t, touch. But I’m willing to compromise. Or I was, except now my hands are tied.” She met his eyes for the first time since she walked in. “I was going to sign those Accords to keep us out of a situation like the one we just dealt with. That option’s gone.”

Clint swallowed. It wasn’t that he didn’t understand her point; he just couldn’t agree to it. “Do you regret—”

“No,” she said instantly. “No, I don’t regret any of it. I’d have kept trying to negotiate, but Ross crossed a line. He tortured Wanda, he locked up those kids—I could never go along with that. Or with how he treated Tony. But one bad man doesn’t mean the whole system’s wrong.”

“The system let him do those things,” Clint said steadily. “No one stopped him. Not the EU, not the President, and I’m assuming Caldwell knew because Ross was his Secretary of State, and definitely not the UN reps.”

Maria raised her hands. “I’m not saying they’re in the right, Clint. I just think there was room to negotiate over Ross and Berntsen’s heads. I think there’s a lot of decent people who wouldn’t have gone along with that if they hadn’t—”

“Do you think they didn’t know?” Clint said.

She hesitated.

“Maria, this system’s broken,” he said. “I’m not going to forgive this. Do you know what it’s like to be locked in a cage? For someone like me? Have you had to sit and listen to a girl you took under your wing scream because they electrocuted her into cooperation? I can’t—I can’t believe the UN didn’t know. Ross works directly underneath them.”

Maria looked down at the table. “I understand,” she said quietly. “But our enemy isn’t the United Nations. It’s Thanos.”

Clint wasn’t so sure that they weren’t both the Avengers’ enemies, but he knew how to pick his battles and kept that thought to himself. “Thanos is a problem, but if the UN won’t let us do our jobs, they might leave the planet undefended.”
“They wouldn’t,” Maria said.

“They’re currently engaging in willful denial of the danger the Daavi present,” Clint countered. “I know that and I’ve been in a prison cell for two days. They’re arguing and bickering about generals and money and who should contribute how many troops and planes and God knows what else. Meanwhile, Fury’s out there doing shit, getting ready, and no one has even moved on the Daavi bases except to “establish perimeters”. It’s fucking ridiculous.”

“This system isn’t so different from SHIELD,” Maria said. “From the organization we worked in for years. Can’t you see that?”

Clint was silent for a moment. “The difference is that SHIELD had watchers. And even then—you worked in the system because you believed in it. Me? Maria, I literally ran away and joined the circus, then became a hit man, then got recruited by a top-secret intelligence organization, where I quickly got a rep for not doing well with orders.”

“Which is why Fury sent you after Natasha,” Maria said quickly. “You can work in the system just fine if you like to improvise—”

“That’s my point,” Clint said. “It was fine. For a long time. I got to do what I was good at, I got to help people, I had good partners—I bit my tongue and worked in the system because it was the best of my options. That doesn’t mean I enjoyed it.”

Pain—that was real, genuine pain on Maria’s face.

“I love you,” Clint said quietly. It wasn’t the first time he’d said those words to her, but it was close, and they still tasted fresh and brave and frightening. “Maria. We can work this out.”

“I hope so,” she said softly.

They sat in the galley until the motion sensor lights turned off, and longer, holding hands across the table but not speaking a word.
“Bruce. Bruce, buddy, wake up.”

He jolted upright. Blinded.

It took several seconds for his eyes to sort through his surroundings and his brain to remember where they were and what had happened.

Safe house. Pennsylvania. He’d been sleeping for two days.

“They’re here,” Darcy said, leaning on his doorframe. In this setting—the rustic wood farmhouse, the flannel shirt and jeans she was wearing, all too big—she looked soft and friendly and kind. Nothing like the hard-faced person she became when the Avengers were in crisis mode and she was in the tower blackmailing Ross into letting her talk to Steve on Ross’ cell phone. He’d been awake for that much, at least.

“Okay,” Bruce said, swinging his legs off the bed. His entire body was one giant ache, bones to muscles to skin and everything in between. Even his kidneys ached. And his head. “I, uh…”

“Clothes in the drawers,” Darcy said, pointing. “Not sure what’ll fit you, since Clint and Natasha seemed to have stashed super random clothes here, but it’ll cover what needs covering. I left water and some Ibuprofin in the bathroom. Breakfast in the kitchen when you’re ready.”

“Thanks,” he said, finding a smile somewhere to offer her.

Darcy quirked an eyebrow. Clearly she wasn’t falling for it. “No one blames you, Bruce,” she said.

“Plenty of people do.” He waved vaguely, trying to indicate the world at large.

“No one here does,” she said. “No one who matters.”

She vanished before he could tell her he knew that, and was grateful for it. Before he could admit that he was past blaming himself. Past feeling guilty. He couldn’t even imagine what the damage would’ve been if Loki had been hit with a psychosis-inducing poison. No, more than anything else, he was pissed that everyone else was blaming him.

Some of the blame lay on the Avengers, he knew that—they should’ve spent more time coming up with anti-rogue-Hulk options. But he’d been in control of the Hulk for a while now. He’d gotten so used to his other side protecting him from projectiles he hadn’t even considered being drugged.

That was foolish.

But he wasn’t going to let himself be locked up because of something he had never wanted in the first place.

The only sound in the kitchen was chewing.

Steve, Bucky, Vision, and Maria were nowhere to be seen. Tony was sprawled on a sofa with a pillow over his eyes and an empty plate sitting on his stomach. Wanda and Pietro seemed to have
fallen asleep on the floor next to him, leaning back against the sofa and sideways against each other. Natasha, Clint, Loki, Sam, Helen, Jane, and Darcy were piled around the table eating what appeared to be mass quantities of scrambled eggs with cheese and chopped bacon mixed in.

Bruce found a seat between Natasha and Loki and made himself a plate. At first it was only out of a remote awareness that his body needed food and not out of any actual desire to eat, but as soon as the first few bites registered to his stomach, his hunger woke with a vengeance. He ended up eating seconds. Then thirds.

“When was the last time you ate?” Sam said, squinting at him.

Bruce swallowed. “I had some Cliff bars coming home from… from Alaska.”

Darcy looked at the three empty frying pans. “Sam, I’m thinking you might need to make more eggs.”

“You guys are eating me out of house and home,” Clint said with a tired grin.

“No, it’s okay,” Bruce said when Sam started to stand up. “I’ll make more, I’ve been sleeping for… long enough.” He grabbed one of the pans.

“You volunteered this place,” Natasha said, poking Clint in the ribs. “You know how much we eat.”

Clint looked sorrowfully at his empty plate. “I spent sixty dollars on eggs this morning.”

“Last carton,” Bruce said, pulling it out of the clearly several-years-old refrigerator. He dug around for a bowl, comforted by the familiar motions and rhythms of the kitchen.

“Someone’s going to have to go shopping,” Helen said, examining the table with a critical eye. “Steve and Bucky and Maria haven’t eaten yet.”

Bruce just happened to be looking at Clint when Helen said Maria’s name, which was the only reason he noticed Clint’s microscopic flinch.

“What about the kids?” he said, distracting them. “I missed that—where are they all?”

“I have a friend,” Clint said. He sat back in his chair. “Owes me a favor. Actually, multiple favors. He runs a winter resort up in Maine. Retirement kind of deal.”

“Oh,” Natasha said. “Sir Hockey.” She shook her head. “I was wondering why you insisted I stay on the jet.”

Clint snorted. “Yeah, him.”

“Wait—why’d she have to stay on the jet?” Sam asked. “He seemed pretty cool.”

“He hates me,” Natasha said. “Still doesn’t know Clint considers me a friend.”

“…and why does he hate you?” Darcy asked.

“I killed his daughter.”

They all stared.

Natasha sipped her water.
Clint, grinning, swatted her on the shoulder. “The daughter joined a private security company and got hired out to protect this dickish Middle Eastern oil mogul. Tasha and… who else?”

“Greenstick.”

“No wonder you got pissed. Tasha and this rookie Greenstick everyone at SHIELD hated went after the mogul because he was helping smuggle arms across various borders to people we didn’t like. Daughter died in the process. Sir Hockey never forgave her.”

“There’s more to this story and I want to hear it later,” Darcy said. “But—the kids?”

“Hockey owes me, and his resort’s shut down for the off season,” Clint said. “He hangs out up there on his own all summer. Weird dude. Gets his supplies delivered. I gave him money and told him to order extra food, say some business bigwigs are up there on a hiking retreat and eating him out of house and home. He hit me with a stick and told me he can think up his own cover stories.” He laughed to himself. “He’ll give the kids rooms and keep them in line for up to a month. At that point, we’ll have to sort something else out.”

“At that point, we’ll either be dead, in prison, or victorious,” Natasha said. “So let’s not worry about it just yet.”

“I won’t be in prison,” Darcy said. “If you all go down, I’m saying you kidnapped me so I wouldn’t talk.”

“So much for team loyalty,” Sam said.

Bruce stirred his eggs.

“Oh, shut up,” Darcy said without rancor. “Obviously I’d be working on getting you all out.”

Loki smiled faintly.

“And where will you be?” Natasha asked him. “Since I can’t see you letting Earth authorities arrest you.”

Clint laughed. “Can you imagine?”

“I’d rather not,” Bruce said drily, reclaiming his seat at the table and starting in on his fourth plate.

Loki shrugged. “You predict rightly.” He propped one elbow on Darcy’s much-lower shoulder. “I would hardly abandon you to the mercies of your world’s foolish governments.”

“Awww, you do care,” Sam said with a grin.

“I live to serve,” Loki said, which was so patently ridiculous coming from one of the most selfish people Bruce had ever met that they all started laughing. Freely, despite the undertone of tension—the elephant in the room no one was talking about. The unanswered question what do we do next? Because they needed the release—needed to be reminded that there could be laughter and friendship even in the middle of this chaos.

Bruce was so impossibly grateful that he could sit here and laugh with them even after everything. That they didn’t judge him, mock him, fear him.

“I need sleep,” Sam said eventually. “Wasn’t very restful, being in a cell. Also, does anyone know if Tony brought along another wingsuit? Since the UN still has mine. Bastards.”
“I sent one over,” Tony said, voice muffled. “It’s in the fourth room on your left, second floor. Big windows.”

Jane twisted around to look at him. “We thought you were sleeping.”

Tony lifted the pillow and glared at them with one eye open. “I was.”

Helen grinned.

“Okay,” Sam said. “Night, everyone.”

“I would normally make fun of you for going to bed at six thirty but right now I don’t exactly blame you,” Darcy said. “I’m off, too.”

She and Sam wandered out together. Jane and Helen followed soon after, holding hands. Bruce wondered when that had happened. He’d been wondering when it would happen for a while, actually. Jane wasn’t good at hiding the way she watched Helen whenever she wasn’t occupied with something else.

Bruce finished his eggs and began methodically washing dishes, deliberately loudly.

Tony only lasted through thirty seconds of this before he groaned and sat up. “Fine, point taken, I’ll go find an actual bed. Oh look. They’re sleeping on the floor. How cliché. Come on, up, we don’t want you sore,” he said, nudging Pietro and Wanda’s shoulders. The twins blinked and woke up slowly. Pietro swatted Tony’s hand away sleepily.

“Wanna bed,” he mumbled.

“Yes, well, if you want one, come on, I’ll show you the empty rooms,” Tony said. “Up.”

Pietro staggered glassy-eyed to his feet. Wanda followed a second later, looking only fractionally more awake.

Natasha knocked back the last of whatever she was drinking. Bruce had been trying to identify the vaguely blueish liquid all through their dinner of eggs, and failing. She stood up, slung Pietro’s arm over her shoulder, and helped Tony get the exhausted Maximoff twins out of the room.

Loki made as if to follow.

“Loki,” Bruce said. “Wait.”

Loki paused.

Bruce took a deep breath and set aside the last of the frying pans to dry. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome,” Loki said. His face was unreadable.

“I’m not sure I really… believed you could outdo the Hulk until now,” Bruce admitted. “You said as much about our fight in the Tower, but…”

“It is understandable,” Loki said. “Even Thor would, I suspect, have a difficult time in combat with your other form.”

Bruce choked on a laugh. “I—yeah. Not that he’d ever admit to that.”

“Certainly not,” Loki agreed.
“Can you find a way to build a failsafe?” Bruce said in a rush. “In case… in case something like this happens again?”

“I have already begun to do so,” Loki said. “Tony and I discussed it at length while we were planning, and while we were journeying to the prison. While it will take some time to assemble a combination of machinery and **seidr**, since Tony does not have the resources he’s accustomed to, I can place a rune-spell on you that will activate if the Hulk goes rogue, and create an illusion of peace and placidity which should return you to your human shape. Will that suffice?”

“That’s… more than enough,” Bruce said, unable to shake his immense relief.

“For optimum effect, I would prefer to write the runes on your person,” Loki said. “Perhaps your arm?”

“Uh, yeah, that works.” Bruce dug up a Sharpie from a kitchen drawer. “Can you use this?”

Loki examined it. “Yes. Your arm, please.”

Bruce held out his hand.

Loki took his wrist and shoved Bruce’s sleeve aside, an expression of intense concentration crossing his face as he began to write archaic symbols in scrolling lines across the inside of Bruce’s forearm, murmuring spell-words that slipped in and out of Bruce’s head in the now-familiar feeling. His skin tingled where the runes sat.

“Done. The ink will last for two weeks,” Loki said, stepping back. He blinked several times and rolled his wrists. Bruce thought it was an unconscious gesture. “You understand you are not to blame for what happened in Alaska, yes?”

“Partly,” Bruce said, rubbing his arm. His skin felt strange. “We should’ve tried to make a safety net before—”

Loki looked at the ceiling. “You cannot hide that side of yourself forever. Sooner or later, it would have been revealed.”

Bruce frowned at him. “Why do you sound like you’re speaking from experience?”

Loki opened his mouth. And stopped.

“Don’t think I’ve ever seen you at a loss for words,” Bruce said.

“Few have.”

Bruce waited.

“Do you recall the information Thor gave Jane on the main races inhabiting the Nine Realms?” Loki said.

“Yes.” Bruce had spent hours poring over those notes, making Jane help him decode her terrible handwriting. Not that his was any better. He was a biologist and a doctor. He’d give a lot to see and learn about them, and he’d searched through Jane’s notes for the slightest details from Thor.

And that was all the hints he needed to put the pieces together. “You’re not actually Aesir, are you?”

“No,” Loki said. He seemed massively uncomfortable. “No, I am not.”
And then he closed his eyes and his skin began to change color.

Bruce couldn’t hide his shock.

Loki was wearing a short-sleeved shirt and jeans, the most casual clothes Bruce had ever seen him in, and it was easy to see the change shiver up his fingers and arms, down from his forehead, creeping beneath his clothes. Raised lines in roughly symmetrical patterns followed the color, accenting his eye sockets, cheekbones, jaw, wrists, elbows, fingers.

When Loki opened his eyes, they were a deep and iridescent red.

“That’s,” Bruce said. “Not what I was expecting.”

A trace of a bitter smile flickered across Loki’s lips. The scars there were even more apparent now; instead of being silver, they were a darker blue than the rest of his skin. Bruce wondered for the thousandth time where they’d come from. “Your reaction is calmer than I was expecting.”

“I hit my surprise quota when I saw pictures of alien parasites invading Earth,” Bruce said, stepping around the counter to get a closer look. He moved slowly, since Loki was clearly fighting to stay still. “I’m somewhere past surprise in a place where even a friend turning blue is just another day. Where are you… really from?” And how did you end up a prince of Asgard?

Bruce wasn’t so foolish as to not understand why Loki was showing him this.

“You have heard of the Frost Giants,” Loki said distantly. He was retreating behind the cruel, icy shell he’d worn around them the first few months in the Tower. His defense mechanism.

“Thor described them as savages prone to conquering and pillaging,” Bruce said. “In Jane’s notes, he says the Frost Giants were weakened by some big war with Asgard and lost this relic?”

“Casket of Eternal Winters.” Loki shrugged. “It left their power greatly weakened. Jotunheim has largely fallen to ruin. They invaded Midgard, among… other worlds, and Asgard beat back the expansion, took the casket, and left their ancient enemy entirely defeated for thousands of years.”

“And you’re a Frost Giant.”

“A Jotun. Yes.”

Bruce’s mind was spinning. The implications of this— “When did you learn?”

“After Thor’s banishment to Midgard,” Loki said.

“Oh.” So much was suddenly making sense. Why Loki had been so unstable—his side of the events in Puente Antiguo. “And Asgardians don’t think very highly of Frost Giants.”

A hollow laugh. “Not in the slightest. They describe the realm of my birth as a savage, barbaric place. And to some extent this perception is justified. Jotnar civilization has not evolved with the other realms for millennia, as they have no remaining allies. The lack of allies is also partly the old king Laufey’s fault, as he broke almost every treaty he signed and the Jotun empire would attempt to conquer every time it had the strength, no matter who sat upon the throne. But the Asgardian hatred is… dogmatic.”

“Does Thor know?” Bruce said carefully.

“Yes.”
“And he’s not happy about it.”

Loki shrugged. He was pretending to not care, but Bruce saw some cracks in the act. “He’s quite revolted by me, actually.”

Bruce nodded slowly, eyes flicking over the epidermal traceries on Loki’s face. Some of them appeared to extend back along his scalp. The red eyes were a little freaky at first, he had to admit, but once he’d forced himself to look past that, Loki’s Jotun face was actually fascinating.

He must’ve tried to destroy Jotunheim out of some misplaced, desperate, unstable desire to prove himself a member of Asgard, Bruce realized. And when it failed, when Thor and Odin rejected him, he decided he had nothing left where he’d been raised.

But it still didn’t explain—

“If you don’t mind me asking, why did Odin raise you as his own? Everyone thought you and Thor were twins, right?”

“He thought to use me as a puppet ruler on Jotunheim’s throne once I grew old enough,” Loki said bitterly. “He lied to me for my entire childhood to spare me from the truth. He might have loved me, but he hated what I represent more.” He paused. “If he’d told me the truth from the time I was young, then perhaps… But he didn’t.”

“Why you? Did he just grab some random baby out of Jotunheim after he conquered it?”

Loki laughed again, short and sharp. “You are an intelligent man, Bruce. Have a guess.”

Bruce paused, slotting the pieces together. Old king. Conquering. Loki’s old conviction that he had the right to a throne—that he was born to rule. “You’re the giant king’s son. Laufey?”

“Medal for you,” Loki said mockingly. “I am indeed Loki Laufeyson, at your service. I know what it is like to contend with a part of my nature that I never asked for and would relinquish if I had the choice, but I cannot change what I am.”

Bruce hadn’t realized until this moment how—how alone he’d always felt among these people who were all so comfortable in their own skins. Even Tony and his arc reactor, even James and the killer Hydra had made him—they were at peace with all of who they were. They’d accepted it. Learned to like and work with every part of themselves, even the parts they still struggled to control.

“We don’t care that you’re a Frost Giant,” Bruce said quietly. “If you all can forgive me what the Hulk has done, I think we can look beyond the fact that you come from a world who’s committed crimes against Earth. Your father’s and grandfather’s crimes aren’t yours.”

He knew he’d guessed right about at least part of Loki’s preoccupation with his true origins when Loki released a breath that trembled ever so slightly.

Bruce silently offered Loki a square of cookie dough from the fridge. Someone had already broken into the package earlier. Clint, probably, or maybe Darcy. “Earth comfort food,” he said. “Might help.”

“My thanks,” Loki said, accepting it.

Bruce took a square for himself.
A kindred spirit, kind of. That was what he’d found tonight.

Their circumstances were different, true. But similar enough that he understood perfectly what Loki was going through. And he was relieved, comforted, to know Loki understood him.

Somehow they’d managed to help each other even though they both had broken pieces.

Loki’s skin slowly faded back to its previous pale shade, and his eyes turned from red to bright poison green.

“You have a family here,” Loki said when he finished eating. “People who accept all of you as you are. You can talk to them.”

“Something you never had, am I right?” Bruce said.

Loki’s lips quirked. “Not as much.”

Bruce shrugged. “Well, you’ve got one now, too.”

Loki didn’t reply. Bruce wanted to help him—touch his shoulder, reassure him—but he didn’t know how, or what to say. That sort of thing had never been his area of expertise. So he left to return to his bed and sleep another seven hours.
[Classified Location], Safe House, Pennsylvania, United States

May 2012

Steve didn’t like the silence here.

He’d gotten used to the sounds of New York. Buses, car horns, voices, airplanes overhead, the constant hum of the tower. Even up in the penthouse living quarters at the top of the tower, you couldn’t get away from it. Clint and Natasha’s safe spot was rural and hidden and the only sounds he’d heard in the half hour since waking up were bird noises and rustling trees. He hated it. He wanted to go hit something but apparently Clint had gotten mad the last time they were here and given all the punching bags a Swiss cheese vibe with his arrows, and everything else was wood or rock.

He could just go chop wood. He was sure they had an axe around here somewhere. This felt like the kind of place that would have a hatchet and a woodbox and an actual fireplace.

It felt like the kind of place he’d once imagined settling down in. Steve wasn’t sure exactly what part of him had wanted this or when it had died, but it was sometime after joining the army and before crashing into an ice shelf. Now he just got twitchy and bored.

He methodically brushed his teeth, changed into plain clothes that were all either too big or too small from the cabinet in the room with bunk beds he’d shared with Bucky the night before, and went down to the kitchen.

Bucky was already there, nursing a cup of something hot. Natasha was curled into his side on a chair that really was not meant for two people, especially when one of the people was as muscular and large as Bucky, but they seemed to be making it work.

Helen and Jane and Darcy were clustered around the stove. Steve wandered over to them, glanced at the unidentifiable multicolored substance, and made a note to wait for Sam or Loki to show up before he ate anything.

“Morning,” Darcy said, inexplicably cheerful and glowing.

“Morning,” he said. “Where’s Sharon?”

“Sleeping.” Helen turned around and frowned at him until he realized he was in her way and backed up. She reached for the fridge. “Whatever she was hit with scrambled the connections between her neurons. Fortunately I had the foresight to fit the newest incarnation of the cradle in the jet we took to get here, and it was able to help somewhat. Loki and Wanda are working on her now.”

Which left Sam and Clint as their options to make actual food. Steve decided he was hungry enough to make something on his own and dug around until he found bread and a toaster.

“Wait,” he said, realizing. “Sharon still doesn’t know about Loki.”

“We decided it was time to tell her,” Helen said. “He said he’ll put on his illusion when and if she
wakes up, explain things, and then take it down.”

Steve prayed she’d take it well.

Pietro, Sam, and Clint wandered in a few minutes later in a single group, arguing over something to do with a movie Steve didn’t know. Bruce and Tony were the next to arrive, both dead silent and heading straight for the coffee machine. Steve pushed the cream and sugar and two mugs in their direction and tried not to grin at the glare Tony was giving a random blue vase tucked into a corner.

But even though they were all relaxed, even though the scene was comfortingly mundane (or at least as mundane as any of their lives ever got anymore), no one had forgotten why they were hiding in a farmhouse in the middle of the Pennsylvanian woods.

Clint took one look at the mess on the stove and winced. “What are you doing in my kitchen?”

“Cooking,” Jane said innocently.

“I don’t know what you’re doing, but cooking is not the right word.” Clint reached around her and grabbed the pan. “This smells like something died, how did you even—”

“Spices,” Darcy said happily.

Sam sniffed. His eyebrows rose. “I was going to ask, but now I don’t even want to know.”

Helen and Darcy both glared at him.

“Whoa, okay, going over this way,” Sam said, walking backwards to the couch. Pietro stuck a foot out and tripped him. Sam fell on top of Bucky and Natasha.

Steve bit back a laugh at the look on Sam’s face and turned away from the chaos as they tried to sort themselves out. “Do you have enough food for all of us?” he asked Clint.

Clint frowned at the contents of the fridge. “I mean, we ate literally all the eggs last night, but I have five pounds of bacon and a microwave, so that’s a start.”

With the prospect of food, the rest of the team started to gather around the large, scarred wood table in mismatched chairs. “Pasta,” Pietro called. “I want pasta.”

“And I want to not be on the world’s wanted list,” Sam told him, having finally detangled himself from Bucky and seeming unsure of whether he should be more irritated with Bucky or Pietro. He sat as far away from both as he could get, which meant sitting next to Darcy, who Steve knew for a fact Sam didn’t fully know how to handle. “Can’t always have these things.”

“I like being on a wanted list,” Clint said, shutting the fridge and dumping vacuum packed bacon on the counter. “Means I’m doing my job right.”

Maria came in just in time to hear this. “If you were doing your job right, no one would know to put you on the wanted list,” she said.

“Burn,” Darcy said, laughing. Helen gave Maria an appreciative nod.

Steve reached for his toast, but Clint grabbed it and threw it at Maria without so much as a second to aim. The toast, of course, hit her squarely in the face.

“Hey,” Steve said. “That was my breakfast.”
“It felt like a hockey puck, man,” Clint said. “Go sit down, I’ll cook. Your blond ass takes up too much kitchen space.”

Steve went to sit down.

He jumped up again two seconds after he hit the chair, because Sharon walked in, followed closely by Loki and Wanda and clearly somewhat uncomfortable with Loki’s presence.

“Sharon,” he said. “You’re okay?”

“Pro tip,” Sharon said with a halfway sincere smile. “Don’t get hit by the purple lasers. It felt like someone took an eggbeater to my thoughts. Didn’t help waking up to find out a supervillain healed me and is not actually a supervillain.”

“That was one of the most difficult things I’ve ever done,” Wanda said, taking a seat next to Pietro.

Pietro passed her a plate. “What, putting her head back together or convincing her not to shoot Loki?”

Wanda elbowed him.

“You’ve exhibited significant improvement,” Loki said, ignoring the twins’ joking. He sat between Wanda and Darcy, who instantly turned her chair sideways and started bouncing her feet on the rungs of Loki’s chair. He gave her a long-suffering look but didn’t say anything.

Steve smiled at Sharon and pulled out a chair for her between him and Tony, who was still not awake enough to even join in the conversation.

“Thanks,” she said.

A large plate of toast, which admittedly looked much better than the one Steve had made, landed on the table and distracted everyone. “Sam, want to help me out here?” Clint said. “Since everyone else is liable to set my kitchen on fire.”

“Excuse you,” Loki said. “I am just as capable as you are.”

Sharon’s mouth opened just a little bit with surprise, though Steve couldn’t tell whether it was at the idea of Loki cooking or at the fact that Loki had made a joke. Possibly both.

Sam gave Loki a pointed look as he stood up. “You’re gonna help?”

Loki considered. “No.”

“Exactly.”

Sam came back a few seconds later with bacon. Clint followed it up with pasta not long after, to Pietro’s obvious delight, and several large containers of water, milk, and orange juice. For several minutes, there was little conversation while everyone busied themselves eating.

Sharon was the first to break the silence. “What is this place exactly?”

Clint talked around a large bite of bacon. “Safe house.”

“Obviously,” Sharon said.

Natasha kicked Clint under the table. Steve could only tell because she jolted slightly and Clint
winced. “I bought it at least ten years ago under a false identity. There’s no one else around for forty-three miles. We keep it stocked with food, random clothes, weapons, and vehicles.”

“Vehicles?” Sam said. “I didn’t see a hangar.”

Clint shrugged. “I had an underground garage put in a few years back. We’ve got, what, nine cars here?”

“Eleven,” Natasha said. “Thirteen if you count the motorcycles. Also a helicopter.”

“And lots of weapons,” Clint said.

“She already said that,” Pietro said.

“It seemed worth repeating.”

“How long before the food runs out?” Steve said.

Clint snorted. “Well, last night I’d have said a week. Now? Four days at the most.”

“And… how long until Thanos attacks?”

Sharon shifted a little in her seat.

“Loki and Wanda caught you up?” Darcy asked, looking closely at Sharon across the table.

Sharon gestured with a piece of bacon. She seemed to have woken up with quite an appetite. “They gave me the CliffNotes version. I’ll stop you if anything gets too confusing.”

“Three weeks at the most, to answer your question,” Loki told Steve.

The tension in the room instantly ratcheted up a notch or five.

“How do you know that?” Natasha said.

Darcy looked at Loki. “Do you want to tell them, or should I?”

“Tell us what?” Tony said.

“I performed a spell before our first trip to the prison that allowed me to send my mind only to Thanos’ location,” Loki said flatly. He told them of a bulbous, asymmetrical hive-city in space, powered by massive engines and inhabited by an army of Daavi and various other races from around the universe, all cutthroat mercenaries, outcasts, criminals, and killers, all loyal to Thanos. He explained that Thanos had some kind of secret weapon at his disposal and the Daavi were only supposed to soften up Earth before said secret weapon finished the battle and left Fury in a position to rule as Thanos’ lackey. He shot down suggestions of stealing a spaceship and flying to fight Thanos before anyone could raise them.

There was a long moment of silence when he finished talking.

“Why do we have to do this twice?” Clint said. “Seriously. The world goes all of human civilization and then two times in the span of a year we have an alien invasion.”

“You have had such invasions before,” Loki said. “You simply do not remember them.”

“Frost Giants,” Jane said. “Right?”
Bruce shifted in his seat.

Loki gave her a questioning look.

Jane shrugged. “Thor told me about them.”

“…yes,” Loki said. “Among others, though that was the most significant and recent attempt to conquer Midgard.”

Steve suspected there was something more going on here, but he let it slide. “So what’s our play?”

“We need the armies of Earth,” Vision said. It was the first time he’d spoken all morning. “Or we will be too weakened by fighting the Daavi to defeat Thanos before he can use his weapon. That is, if we can even determine a way to reach him before he arrives at the surface of the planet.”

Steve opened his mouth to say no, we’re not working with those lying bastards ever again. Then he squashed his principles and thought about it.

“He’s right,” Maria said before anyone else could respond. “You know he’s right.”

“Doesn’t mean I like it,” Bucky muttered, picking at a scar on the table.

Natasha covered his hand with hers. “We’re not in a good position to negotiate from.”

“We take it public and we are,” Darcy said. “Bruce, if you’re okay with it, Bucky, Steve, uh… Natasha, you too if you can bring yourself to be on camera—I’ll film you all explaining it today. Not all of you heard this bit—”

“I can write a bug that’ll put the video up on every news website and social media platform for at least a few hours,” Tony said. “And set up an untraceable website for it to be on, plus post it to YouTube, for when they inevitably get the videos down. It’ll be all over the world in the span of thirty minutes.”

“I love the Internet,” Clint said.

Sam frowned. “Just… talk about things?”

“The world’s being fed the line that we’re criminals,” Steve said. “If we can convince them otherwise, and then tell them about the threat from the Daavi and our offer to work with the UN and the national military forces to protect the planet, public pressure will force them to work with us.”

Sharon nodded slowly. “I think it’ll work.”

“Clint, please tell me you have a proper video camera somewhere around here,” Darcy said.

“Probably.” Clint shrugged.

“We should do it indoors,” Natasha said. “In a windowless room with a sheet backing and a microphone so there’s no audio interference of bird noises to clue them in to the fact that we’re in a rural area, and no natural light to help anyone guess what time zone we’re in.”

“We could play city background noise off a speaker in the background,” Wanda said. “To confuse them further.”

Steve nodded at her. “Good idea.”
“You’re starting to think like a spy,” Clint said with a grin.

Wanda tapped her fingers absently on the table. “I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

“It was meant as one,” he said.

“We have Sabina Prescott and Prince T’Challa working with us,” Darcy said. “Supposedly. I’d love to trust the Wakandans, I don’t fully, but I trust them enough for this bit. Tony, you talked to T’Challa, thoughts?”

Tony turned his mug around in his hands. It was empty but he seemed to need to fidget. “They’ll see our side here.”

“And Coulson,” Maria said. Steve could tell it meant a lot to her that Coulson had helped them—had sided with them. “He’s been assigned to the Avengers Task Force; he’ll back us.”

Darcy already had her phone out, typing furiously. Steve still couldn’t even approach her speed on touch screen phone keyboards. Or any kind of keyboard. He watched her, then watched Loki watch her, and wondered what exactly was going on between those two. Something had changed recently—some tension had disappeared. They usually sat together and were frequently just casually touching, even though Loki often preferred to stay silent.

“Loki?” Steve said. “What do you think?”

He blinked, almost as if he were surprised to be asked. Steve wanted to punch Thor for treating Loki’s opinions as so worthless for so long that even in a group of friends and allies Loki would still be taken aback for them to ask.

“It is a clever plan,” he said. “To marshal the people of Midgard to your side, and use your allies within the system… I concur. It should work.”

“I’ll go find the camera,” Clint said, pushing his chair back.

“What about after?”

They all looked at Bruce. Clint paused, halfway to his feet.

“They’re going to want some concession,” Darcy predicted. “From some, or all, of us, in exchange for their help. Some promise we’ll come in or submit to justice or some shit. And they’ll have contingency plans in place to like tranquilize or catch us as soon as the battle’s over.”

“I would,” Loki said.

“And… we’re just going along with that?” Bruce looked around. “We’ve all been betrayed and lied to by these people multiple times in a dozen different ways. Are we actually going to trust them again?”

“I’m not,” Tony said. “I tried taking their orders. Didn’t work out.”

Maria shifted in her seat.

“They’re still the people in charge,” Vision said. “They have been elected—”

“That’s the thing,” Darcy said. “In the UN, a lot of them haven’t. A lot of the power rests in commissioners and committees who are just appointed by representatives. They don’t have a popular mandate. And even if they did, just because a majority of people think something’s right doesn’t
mean it is. Hence pluralistic democracies being the most successful form of governing a large country. Or even a small one.”

Everyone stared at her. Loki grinned.


Steve set his jaw. “I don’t think it matters.”

“Um,” Sam said. “Explain?”

“To me,” Steve clarified. He had an idea of where he was going with this. He hadn’t looked at it head-on yet, because it was a big change and—not frightening per se, but he wasn’t ready to acknowledge it either. And he wouldn’t drag any of them into it unwillingly. “It doesn’t matter to me. I’m done taking orders. From anyone, elected or not.”

Darcy watched him carefully. “That’s a pretty big thing to declare.”

“I’ve been thinking about it.” Steve shifted in his seat. For all that he’d been expected to give leaderly speeches of fire and inspiration, he still wasn’t entirely comfortable with it. He didn’t want troops to command; he wanted equals. So this wasn’t going to be a speech. He’d just put himself out there. “I’m sure.”

“I’m with him,” Bruce said. “I don’t care where we go. I like—I like Avenging. I like getting to do things that matter… like this. I’m not giving that up—I’m not taking orders from them anymore either.”

“Have you thought this through, Steve?” Maria said slowly. “Where will you go? How will you live? Are you going to keep Avenging?”

“Yes, I don’t know, it doesn’t matter, and yes,” he said.

Maria turned on Sam. “And you?”

Sam raised his hands. “I do what he does, only slower.”

Tony snorted.

“So you, a normal citizen and a soldier, are fine just going off the rails like this?”

Clint reached for her. “Maria.”

She shook him off. “Sam?”

“I had my share of bad orders and good,” Sam said. “I did time under idiots and decent men alike. Do I want to keep fighting the good fight? Yes. Do I want to risk getting stuck under idiots again? Hell no. Doesn’t help that I already don’t trust these guys.”

Steve felt a flash of gratitude so strong it was physically painful. Sam didn’t have to do this. Sam had a choice, more than almost any of them—a life to go back to. But he was here. He was standing with Steve because they were family now.

Maria shook her head. “I don’t believe this. I assume you’re going with him,” she said to Natasha and Bucky.

Natasha shrugged. Bucky’s hand was resting on her thigh; she covered it with her own and said,
“We don’t have another option. He has to run, and where he goes, I go. But even if we did…”

“We’d be with Steve,” Bucky said.

Steve smiled across the table at his friend. Bucky’s own face softened in response, but he still looked too tense, too on edge, to truly smile.

He’d been healing, and then Fury picked apart his mind, and then the UN threw Bucky in a cage for two days, and some of the man Steve had known since they were teenagers had vanished again. That alone was enough to make Steve see red.

“Tony?” Natasha said. “You’re being uncharacteristically non-hypervocal.”

Steve felt his lips tug to one side. “That’s because he already made up his mind.”

He couldn’t see Tony well around Sharon, who sat between them, but he knew Tony well enough to understand he’d been silent for reasons beyond exhaustion. Steve just wasn’t certain what way Tony had decided.

He knew what he hoped Tony would choose. Hoped with a strength that bordered on desperation.

Tony stopped spinning his mug on the table. “What they said.”

Even Vision looked shocked.

Steve’s chest caved in with relief.

“That, I did not expect,” Sam said.

“Nice to know I haven’t gotten predictable.” Tony sat back in his chair.

“I have an equation,” Vision said.

“Oh, that’ll clear it up,” Sam said.

Maria shot him an irritated look.

“Since Tony announced himself, there has been an exponential rise in the number of known enhanced persons. And during the same period, the number of potentially world-ending events has risen at a commensurate rate.”

“Hang on,” Steve said, not quite able to believe his ears. “Are you saying it’s our fault?”

Vision met his eyes calmly. “I am saying there is a correlation. However, correlation is not causation, and a significant percentage of the cause for many such events can be attributed to the exponential increase in human knowledge of the last century, which has allowed us to attempt to work with technologies and powers not of our world. The Tesseract. The mind stone. Thor. Loki. Thanos.”

“So what do you think?” Steve said.

“We have a one hundred percent success rate stopping these events,” Vision said. “And the casualties are lower with a small superpowered force than I have calculated they would be with a large one of normal fighting capacity, were such a conventional army even capable of besting opponents like Thanos. So long as we continue to enact reasonable precautions for those of us who may lose control—Bruce, James, I do not mean to insult you, only to point out that you can be liabilities.”
“I can prevent the trigger words from affecting James,” Loki said. “Wanda, if you will assist me, it will likely go faster.”

“Of course,” Wanda said.

“We’re already working on something for me,” Bruce added. “Joint project. Tony, me, Loki.”

“There you have it.” Vision looked at Maria. “Objectively, the decision that gives us the most autonomy and therefore the greatest chance of future victories is to deny the validity of the Accords. I said once I do not relish being labeled a vigilante, but I do not mind, if it is the product of a logical choice.”

“How about criminal?” Sharon said mildly. “Because that’s what they will call you.”

Vision shrugged. “I have not the human preoccupation with such labels. Criminal, vigilante, hero—do they not depend on who is, in the end, victorious?”

“Well stated,” Loki said with a shark’s smile.

Steve couldn’t breathe right. *Vision* had agreed. Vision, and Tony. It was more than he’d dared hoped for.

He hadn’t realized how much he wanted them with them until he was confronted with the imminent possibility of them saying they wouldn’t be.

“And you,” Maria said to Wanda. Also Pietro, but—Steve thought—mostly Wanda. “If you go down this path, they’ll always fear you.”

Wanda looked at her hands.

“Hey,” Clint said. “Not cool.”

Maria looked slightly remorseful, but she said nothing.

Red light gleamed between Wanda’s fingers, then vanished. When she looked up, her expression was set. “They tortured me. Locked me in a cage. I want vengeance, not to *join* them like a sheep. I cannot control their fear,” she said. “Only my own.”

Steve’s eyebrows rose.

“Melodramatic,” Pietro said, breaking the tension. “I mean, what she said, only with less angst. Hydra’s worse than the UN, but—”

He didn’t continue. Steve knew his decision was partly the taking orders thing, since Pietro didn’t seem the type to go along with authority, but it also had a lot to do with what they’d done to his sister.

He realized Darcy, Loki, Sharon, and Clint were the only people still undecided.

Loki, Steve could predict. Clint too. He really, really hoped whatever bond existed between Darcy and Loki would mean he didn’t have to have Darcy on the other side, because he did *not* want to make an enemy of her.

And Sharon. He couldn’t say why, exactly, but he liked having her as an ally and wanted her to stay with them.
“I can’t believe this,” Maria said. “Hierarchy, rules, protocol—those things exist for a reason.”

“To be broken,” Darcy suggested with a shit-eating grin.

Maria glared at her. “Nothing is made to be broken.”

Sam raised his hand. “Piñatas.”

“Pasta,” Jane added.

“Eggshells,” Tony said.

“Rules,” Loki said.

Maria threw her hands in the air.

“Hold on,” Helen said. “I know I’m not part of your group, not really, but—Tony. You go down that road… you understand what that means for Stark Industries?”

Tony looked down. “Yeah.”

“You won’t be able to stay CEO,” Helen said. “You won’t have all the resources you’re used to. Your inventions, your company, your life—gone.” You have more to lose than most of us, was what she meant. “I can claim plausible deniability—say you kidnapped me so I wouldn’t tattle. Don’t look at me like that, I’ll keep your secrets, but if I wanted out, I would hope you’d let me make that choice,” she said.

Steve and Darcy looked at Jane.

“She’d keep the secrets,” Jane said. “So would I.”

“Jane,” Darcy said softly.

“I’m not giving up my science to be a vigilante,” Jane said, but not angrily. Darcy nodded—she wasn’t mad, either. “We can stay in touch. I can even help you guys out. I like this—this family. Being a part of it. But the whole reason I’m even useful is because of science. Research. I can’t keep doing that easily on the run. Tony and Bruce, you wouldn’t be able to, either.”

“I know,” Bruce said. “I’ve accepted that.”

He sounded sad. Steve wished they didn’t have to—

“What would you say if I told you there is a way that would allow you to keep all that you have, and remain autonomous Avengers?” Loki asked.

Beat of silence.

“First of all, we,” Clint said. “Second, spill.”

Loki leaned forward. “Rule Midgard yourselves.”

Steve opened his mouth. Closed it again.

“I’m sorry,” Maria said. “Did you just propose world domination as a viable option?”

Vision frowned. Darcy’s face was expressionless.
“Steve,” Maria said. “Tony. You’re not seriously considering this.”

“Loki, explain, please?” Bruce said.

Loki looked around the table in a way that reminded Steve he’d been a general and spymaster for centuries—he was used to commanding attention and respect. “We need Midgard’s armies in lieu of support from Asgard or another realm if we wish to defeat Thanos, and Midgard’s armies need us. Do as Darcy proposes, and you will introduce another side of the narrative to the human population. Negotiate a cease-fire with the authorities for the duration of the battle and once it is over, if and when they come for you, no army will be in any position to bring you down. They’ll be decimated by fighting the Daavi, and themselves. Negotiate a peace from that position that leaves you in a position of power that will never again be compromised.”

“Like…” Bucky was focused intently on Loki. Steve’s mind was spinning so hard he could barely concentrate on his friend’s face. This was bigger than he’d imagined.

Somehow it still surprised him how thoroughly he wasn’t Captain America anymore—that no part of him rebelled automatically against this idea.

“The United Nations is useful in that you can use it to sign a treaty with one hundred ninety-three countries simultaneously.” Loki was intense. Sincere. This clearly mattered to him for some reason. “Their armies will try to take you, you’ll defeat them, and they will sign a new Avengers Accords. One in which you may operate within any of their borders, will continue Avenging, and never have to deal with impeding national interests.”

“Stark Industries will make bank,” Darcy said. “In the aftermath. Tony—tens of millions of people are going to need power and utilities. You’re the only name in clean, renewable energy right now. Helen, the cradle tech—stick with Stark and it could save millions of lives. And, Tony, if you start moving now, you can begin reaching into other industries. You’ve hired two thirds of the SHIELD agents who weren’t Hydra as private security; start contracting them out and people will pay.”

Tony squinted at her. “When did you get a business degree?”

“It’s common sense,” she said tartly. “I’m sure you’ll be able to come up with a much more detailed plan. I’m just calling it like I see it.”

Helen pressed her hands flat to the table. “I’m not selling the patent on the cradle to SI.”

“We’ll manufacture it,” Tony said. “You stay in charge of the tech and stay on as a research partner. I already hired Bruce and Jane at that level. It’s a six-figure salary—”

“High sixes,” Jane added.

“And you can walk at any time.” Not that she will. Steve knew a good deal when he saw one, and a contract like that with Stark Industries would be worth more than the salary it paid in the world they were talking about making. It meant security, opportunity, fame and a way to help people if you were interested in either, which Steve suspected Helen was.

Helen cocked her head.

“I’m in,” Jane said, grinning at Darcy.

“As am I.” Helen shrugged. “Not like anyone else is doing well running the world anyway. And we wouldn’t technically be running it, just—influencing. Or am I wrong?”
“You’re not wrong,” Darcy said. “I don’t really feel like having the title Supreme Ruler of Earth tacked in front of my name either. Too much paperwork.”

Sam looked a question at Steve.

Steve raised his eyebrows.

“Sure,” Sam said. “Seems like a good compromise.”

“Are you kidding me?” Maria said, standing up so fast her chair tipped over.

They all stopped. Looked at her.

“This is not a compromise,” she hissed. “This is the opposite of a compromise!”

Tony didn’t even stand. He seemed more focused and self-contained than Steve had seen him in a long time. Since before Pepper died, actually. “We’re choosing between two extremes,” he said. “Subjugating ourselves to the United Nations or going completely rogue, both of which mean giving something up that matters to us. This way we get both.”

“It’s a third extreme,” Maria said. “Worse than either of the other options. You’re proposing—that because you don’t trust these watchers, you refuse all accountability?”

“We’re accountable to ourselves,” Steve said. “And each other. And public opinion.”

“Beyond the extent Darcy can manipulate it, anyway,” Natasha said, earning a few smirks around the table.

Sam furrowed his brows. “Maria, do you really think we’re bad people?”

She paused.

“No,” she said at last. “Of course not. I’m one of you, how could I? I just—everyone can go astray. Fury. Ross. Berntsen. They all believe that they’re doing what’s right. How long before you make wrong choices too?”

“We’ve already made them,” Tony said. When Steve leaned forward to look at him, there was a vulnerability to Tony’s face that he normally never let show. “Some of us... more than others. We’re mature people; we know what we think is right and wrong. We deal with the guilt. We learn from our mistakes. We don’t make them again.”

“And it’s not like we all have the same ideas of right and wrong,” Natasha said drily. “We argue. All the time.” She met Maria’s eyes. “We’re all equals at this table whether or not we have superpowers or a genius IQ. We all have a voice.”

“Who’s willing to go along with this plan?” Bruce said. “For starters, I am.”

He looked to his left, at Sam.

Sam looked at Steve. “I’m in.”

Darcy shrugged. “I think it’s obvious where I stand.”

Loki looked to Wanda without a word.

She exchanged a long look with Pietro.
“We stand with you,” she said at last.

A fleeting grin crossed Natasha’s lips as Bucky said, “So do we.”

Maria slumped down into her seat and looked at Clint. Pleading.

He met her eyes.

Looked down at the table. “Yep,” he said. “I’m with all you.”

Maria flinched.

Vision sat perfectly still. Steve could practically see strings of zeros and ones dancing in the android’s head as he considered.

“It is a viable option,” he said at last. “And we will not be entirely independent—as Steve said, there is public opinion to consider, as well as our own consciences. Far worse and few better people have held power in history than those at this table. I will join you.”

Jane and Helen just nodded, and then shared a quick, private smile that made Steve look away.

“Yes,” he said simply.

Tony propped an elbow on the back of Bruce’s chair. “Same here. Obviously. Sharon? Last one.”

“What am I, rotten fish?” Maria muttered.

“You’ve made it clear where you stand,” Darcy said.

Maria glared at her.

“I only just found out about Loki, and now you throw this at me?” Sharon said, but she smiled a bit, so Steve thought she was joking.

“No time like the present,” Darcy said, with a surprisingly sharklike smile.

Sharon looked around the table. Her eyes were wary but clear, and her face was otherwise impossible to read.

Steve liked this about her, too. She didn’t just jump into things. She considered her options, even when outvoted by a team of six enhanced people, a god, an android body powered by a singularity compressed into matter, several genii, and three unenhanced but highly skilled soldiers.

The last person she looked at was Steve.

He held her gaze, trying to let her see all of him. The good and the bad. The mistakes he’d made and the victories he’d won, the jokes he’d made and the tears he’d cried, the friends he’d made and lost and treasured, the enemies he’d made and beaten. The complete lack of regret, of doubt. (Steve didn’t let himself feel either; they only slowed you down.) The conviction that this was what he wanted and believed in. The hope that she would choose to stand with them—with him—to see it through. Not as a follower, but as a friend.

He wanted this so badly it hurt, and he didn’t want to do it alone, and he couldn’t have explained how grateful he was that he wouldn’t have to.

“I need to think about it a little more,” Sharon said slowly. “I’ll fight with you until Thanos is gone,
and then—then I’ll decide whether I want to be part of… whatever you become after. I’ll keep your secrets whatever I choose.”

“We’ll still be Avengers,” Tony said.

Bruce glanced at him. “Except this time, we’re avenging ourselves, partly.”

“I can get on board with that,” Wanda muttered.

Clint looked at Loki and Wanda, sitting side by side. “Is she telling the truth? About keeping shit to herself?”

“I’d prefer not to breach her mind unless invited,” Loki said.

“Yes.” Wanda looked at Sharon. “She’s honest. And before you ask, I couldn’t turn off the sense that tells me so if I wanted to. It’s just a… general impression of the minds around me. Like reading people’s expressions, except much harder to fool.”

Sharon nodded slowly. “Interesting.”

There was no fear in her face or voice, and there must not have been any in her mind either, because Steve detected a lot of relief in Wanda’s posture as she relaxed and Pietro put an arm around her.

“Now can I go get the video camera?” Clint said.

“Anyone got any more bombshells to drop?” Sam said.

“I don’t know, do you lay eggs?” Bucky said.

“I’ll lay eggs the day you actually turn into a snowman,” Sam said. “Complete with a carrot nose.”

“Yeah, I’m going,” Clint said.

Maria stood up and walked away in the opposite direction. The front door slammed closed a few seconds later.

“Hoo boy, that’s gonna be fun to defuse,” Darcy said.

Steve closed his eyes. He still needed to—process this. What he’d just agreed to. The plan was so simple, and so brilliant, when he thought about it. Loki was a genius, but you didn’t need to be one to come up with this. He’d just needed to be bold enough, or detached enough, to dare even think it. None of the rest of them would have thought to change the paradigm so drastically. Loki had been the push they needed and now they were going with it. They were going to kind of take over the world.

Steve was going to turn on armies he’d once fought beside.

He searched his entire mind for any part of him that resisted that idea. Found nothing. He didn’t want to kill good soldiers, obviously. But that was war. He hadn’t started this fight, but if they tried to attack or cage him or his team—his family—he’d end it. Because for the tantalizing promise of a future free of restraints and oaths and expectations made by and to and from millions of people… he would do a lot.

I’ve given enough.

“I will speak with her,” Loki said.
It took Steve a few seconds to focus back in on the room and realize Loki meant Maria. It took a few more to accept it was *Loki* volunteering for the task.

“Um,” Sam said. “Don’t smite me, but you don’t seem like the comforting type.”

“He’s not,” Darcy muttered.

“I said I intend to speak with her, not comfort her,” Loki said, standing. “I’ll be back.” He glanced at Wanda. “If you could, I would appreciate an idea, when I return, as to whether or not she deceives me in the next few minutes.”

He strode out without waiting for a reply.

“He sure knows how to make an exit,” Sam said.

“Might be better than Tony,” Natasha said with a smirk.

“Excuse you,” Tony said. “No one is better at dramatic entrances and exits than I am.”

*What the hell*, Steve thought, and grinned. “Prove it.”

Tony snapped his fingers.

“*Warning. Warning. Warning,*” Friday’s voice blared from the cabin’s sound system. The lights went out, then began strobing red.

When the alarm system died five seconds later, Tony wasn’t in the room.

“Why do I feel like he had Friday hooked into the alarm system and prepared for the finger snap *just* so he could do that?” Sharon said.

Darcy rolled her eyes, but she was laughing. “He probably did.”

“He *definitely* did,” Steve said, still smiling. “He’s annoying like that.”

“Working with you is going to be entertaining,” Sharon said.

Helen scoffed. “Oh, you have no idea.” She leaned around Jane and Steve and smiled at Sharon. “Welcome to the club.”

Chapter End Notes

I am on a ROLL today and I also feel vaguely bad for leaving you all sans update for 3 days with no warning earlier this week (I’m at a horse show and wifi is questionable at best) so here you go, update number 2 du jour.

I don’t say this enough so thank you to everyone who reads this weird long ass mess of a fic, especially those of you who leave comments and kudos. Feedback means a lot to fanfiction writers everywhere. You're the best!!!
“Maria.”

“Clearly I wasn’t being obvious enough about the fact that I don’t want to talk to any of you right now. Especially you, Loki.”

He paused at the base of the boulder she’d climbed. He was in her blind spot, but she didn’t seem to care. “I am not going to leave until we have this conversation, so you can either speak with me now, or in an hour when you get tired of my presence.”

She was silent.

He rolled his eyes slightly and settled in to wait. It chafed at him almost instantly, but he got himself firmly under control. Loki hated waiting, hated patience—it was such an overrated virtue—but he was an immortal and he’d had to get quite good at it. He could certainly outwait a Midgardian, though perhaps not all long-lived people.

Seventeen minutes later, she spoke.

“Why do you even care what we do?”

“Is it not the role of a friend, to have a vested interest in one’s happiness and goals?”

She turned around enough to give him a scathing look.

“You may not consider me a friend,” Loki said, leaning back on a tree. The bark bit into his skin. “But I consider all of you mine, and I would like to think at least some of you return the sentiment.”

Sentiment. Even now, he had a difficult time accepting that he cared at all for any of them, but it was the undeniable truth.

“You’ve helped us plenty,” Maria said finally. “I consider you an ally.”

“Yet you still cannot like me, because once upon a time I reached into your head and removed everything that makes you, you,” he finished.

For a moment, the only sound was rustling leaves and birdcalls.

“I know it wasn’t you,” Maria said. “I know you didn’t want to do it. But it’s… not easy to get over.”

“I cannot blame you for that,” Loki said. “But—” He took a guess. “Have you considered your resistance to their newest plan is because you’re afraid to want the same things they do?”

She fell perfectly still.

Loki bit back irritation. He did not want to be standing out here in the woods providing therapy. But Clint cared for Maria. Sharon trusted her, and Steve wanted Sharon on board. Darcy had told him she liked Maria, liked working with her. Natasha and Maria had a history that left them with mutual respect and possibly friendship in the future. This woman was tangled in their group and Loki didn’t
want to see any of it fracture. Not so soon after he’d found them and found, as Darcy put it, his people.

Maria also knew all their secrets. She would be a massive liability should she turn on them. He had to judge how likely that was, and prepare for such an eventuality. Maria was intelligent enough to guess that was at least part of his reason for coming to her. She would endeavor to hide any intention of stopping them by betrayal from him, which was why he’d requested Wanda keep her attention focused in his direction.

“What makes you think that?” Maria said.

Loki smirked. “It was a hypothesis, but your reaction lends it merit.”

“Answer my question.”

He considered. It had mostly been an intuitive leap, but when he went over his reasoning… “You were Fury’s right hand,” he said. “Second in command of SHIELD. You achieved that position at an uncommonly young age by working inside the rules, climbing the hierarchy, proving yourself time and time again, training in every spare moment, and only breaking the rules when it was necessary and justified to do so.”

“I know rules are sometimes problematic in this line of work,” Maria snapped. “I’m not some stick-in-the-mud bureaucrat.”

“Which is precisely why you were so successful. As Clint put it, you were an agent who accepted a bureaucratic position,” Loki countered. “You played by the rules, but you knew that intelligence and counterterrorism sometimes require agents in the field to break those rules to survive or complete the mission. And now—now you’re finding that the system you devoted your life to, that you trusted, was a fake, and the one that loosely oversaw it has made one egregious error after another. Your friends and teammates are seriously considering walking away from all that entirely. It wasn’t much of a leap to suspect you want it too, somewhere in your subconscious, but you haven’t admitted it because out of all of them you worked in and for the system the most, and you don’t know what you’d do if it no longer existed to give you a framework in which to make your decisions.” He paused. “Or am I wrong? If so, please enlighten me, it’s a sensation I detest.”

Maria laughed and instantly looked angry about it. “I wish it were easier to dislike you,” she said.

Loki grinned. “You’re not the first to say so.”

“I’ll consider it,” she said. “That’s all you’re getting at the moment. Will you go away now?”

“It’s been a pleasure,” he said with a mocking version of courtly manners. “I hope you enjoy brooding in the forest.”

Maria threw a pinecone at him.

Loki dodged it easily, bowed in her direction with a smirk, and left her alone.

Wanda was waiting on the porch.

Loki raised an eyebrow.

“All honest,” she said. “Far as I could tell without… you know.”
“Breaking into her mind,” Loki suggested.

She nodded.

“You’ve come a long way,” he said again, because he thought she should hear it. The uncertain girl afraid of her own power was gone, and while Wanda’s control was far from absolute, it was vastly improved over where she’d been before.

“Thanks,” Wanda said quietly. “For… training me.”

“As if I’d want an untrained loose cannon of a mage guarding my back,” Loki replied, but softened it with a smirk.

It helped. Wanda grinned back at him.

Then her attention snapped to the front door. “Something’s wrong,” she said. “Darcy—”

Loki didn’t wait to hear the rest. He slammed through the door and into the kitchen. If Darcy was hurt, or worried—

She was standing by the living room window with Bucky and Clint and a video camera, and she looked fine, except for her expression.

She was furious, and worried.

“What’s happened?” Loki demanded.

Clint shot Wanda a look. “Loki, man calm down, you look a little unhinged.”

Loki made an effort to relax. “Darcy?”

“It’s Fury,” she said. “He told everyone who you are.” She waved the camera in Loki’s face. “Go fix your hair or something, because I’m taping you, too, and your face is gonna be all over the Internet. Otherwise we have zero chance of ever getting the UN to work with us. Or, hell, anyone.” She met his eyes and he saw clearly that she regretted this. “Loki, I know you don’t want to talk about it in front of us, let alone seven billion people, but I have to ask you to put on a good show for them.”

He managed a smile. “I believe I can create a convincing portrait of a victim,” he said. Calm. He was calm. On the surface. “Give me a moment.”

He turned around. Walked away. Wanda started to follow him but Clint called her back.

The hallway stretched away in front of him, impossibly long.

Loki made it to the back door.

Then the edge of the clearing around the house. Opposite the direction Maria had gone.

He blinked, and he was far enough into the trees that he couldn’t see or hear or smell any trace of the other Avengers or the safe house. The world around him was silent and still and peaceful.

He hated it. His stomach twisted and he needed to destroy this peace, this quiet, this simple fragment of the world. He needed chaos. He needed to ruin—something. Anything.

His fists clenched.
A tree burst apart into splinters with a *crack*. Then another. And another. Until an acre of forest was destroyed and shattered wood covered the ground and drifted in the air everywhere except a circle around him, even though he didn’t remember casting a spell to shield himself.

Even the trees knew to avoid him.

*This is why they never trust you, never let you in*, his own treacherous mind whispered. *This is why you’ve been cast aside and left alone time after time. They sense this inside you. They know it’s there just waiting to be unleashed. They can feel it and it drives them away. And you like it.*


“Loki.”

“Darcy, this is not a good time,” Loki said, fighting to keep his voice even.

Her footsteps crunched over the ruined forest. He kept his eyes closed even as she came and stood before him.

“Doesn’t this seem… I don’t know, excessive?” she said.

“It’s not just this,” he said. Wondering if maybe he could bleed a little of the poison out. Darcy was the only one he’d trust to speak to about this and even then it made him terrified but he couldn’t stop himself talking. “Everything. What Thanos did. This world. Fury. My… Odin.” He almost choked on the next name. “Thor. I always—I look around me and I have to wreck every bit of happiness and peace I can find.” He laughed bitterly. “I can usually keep it hidden, you know. The monster. I did not want… any of you to see this.”

Darcy shifted her weight. He couldn’t resist opening his eyes. Her face was unusually serious. “You know I’m not afraid of you. Never have been.”

“That says more about your lack of common sense than it does my potential to cause you harm,” Loki said.

She smiled faintly. “Nah. You think I don’t have some of that in me, too? I heard today Ralph’s been committed. He keeps screaming about bugs crawling in and out of his ears.” Her smile turned cold, a match for the one Loki saw when he was in a rage and caught glimpses of his own reflection. “I mean, with your help, I literally drove him insane. He’s also convinced wearing the color blue makes his skin start turning inside out.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever not… crave this,” Loki said. “Chaos. Destroying things.”

“So find things that deserve to be destroyed,” she said simply. “We’ll do it together.”

He couldn’t believe—shouldn’t trust her faith in him. But he was, he *did*, and it was grounding him even though he knew this was foolish. Even though he knew a Midgardian of all people, who would die in a fraction of his own lifespan unless he intervened somehow, was the *last* person he should fall for.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay.”

Darcy grinned. “Oh yay. So nice to know I finally have a decent partner in crime. I mean, I love Jane, but vindictive she is not.”

He wanted so badly to tell her everything.
He leaned down and pulled her close. Darcy stretched up. Her lips grazed the edge of his jaw, shockingly warm. He instantly wanted to have her, even though they were in the middle of the woods and had been up half the night behind a silencing spell on their room.

“You want me to let you videotape me telling all of Midgard about what Thanos did to me?” he said, and traced her cheekbone with his thumb.

Darcy studied him. “I know you’re probably not happy about that—”

“I’m quite capable of playing the victim,” he said with a grin. “Wouldn’t be much of a mischief god otherwise. I’ll be honest… and pretend weakness.” He could do that perfectly well, as long as it was a different version of weakness than the one he truly grappled with. Telling the truth with a lie. He was already savoring the irony.

“Africa.” She leaned in. Slanted her lips against his.

And pulled away. “You’d best get back and brush tree dust out of your hair,” she said with a wicked grin. “Camera’s rolling in ten and I’m sure the others have noticed I’m taking a hella long bathroom break.”

Loki reached for her, and she danced away.

“You will pay me back for this later,” he said, smiling.

She laughed. “I look forward to it. Come on, Sir Broody.”

He jogged after her into the trees. “Sir Broody?”

“You don’t like it? I think there’s some, hmmm, poetic irony. Or some shit. English wasn’t my best class.”

“You are… unbelievable.”

Darcy glanced at him over her shoulder, pure happiness on her face. “Come on, you’d be bored if I was predictable already.”

He resolved to obtain an Apple of Idunn at the first opportunity once this battle was over, no matter what he had to do to get it.

The video was a success.

Loki sprawled across their bead while Darcy read off the results.

“Gallup did a poll,” she said. “Fifty-three percent of Americans now oppose considering us war criminals, especially Bucky. It’s a little shakier on you, but at least they’re not calling for heads to roll anymore. And based on Twitter and Facebook trends, news sites… people are listening.”

“Excellent news.”

“You do that,” he said, amused.

Darcy gave him a distracted smile and vanished out into the house. He heard her calling for Steve and Tony.

As soon as the door closed, Loki abandoned his lazy posture and flipped upright, landing on his feet in the middle of the room.

They needed an edge. A weapon, something unexpected, anything Thanos wouldn’t expect. Jane and Tony’s seidr-disabling weapon was an excellent start, but there was a possibility that it would do nothing but strip Thanos of preapplied runewards, and even that was mere supposition. And there was always a risk that one of Thanos’ spies would pull the data on the weapon from Stark’s servers—or, worse, that the government, when they raided the Tower, would find a working prototype or a ghost of the data and determine for themselves what it was. They already had a way to nearly negate Loki’s influence on their digital systems. He thanked the Norns he’d had a chance to develop a counterward for the seidr-disabler, but he still detested the thought of the United Nations having such technology.

He longed for the access he’d once taken for granted to Asgard’s weapons trove, its relics and blades and ancient objects of power. The Tesseract rested there now; he could think of at least seven other items that would fit his purposes quite nicely, but he could not reach any of them. The energy it would require to worldwalk to Asgard, break into the vaults now that his access would have been revoked, bring the object under his power, and return without being detected—it was far too great a risk, and far too great an expenditure of seidr.

Loki needed something he could call to him from here on Midgard, and he could think of only one possibility.

The Casket of Eternal Winters.

Some fundamental part of him rebelled at the very idea. He’d held it once—called it to himself from an interdimensional storage pocket to defeat Heimdall and let Laufey into Asgard. Even then, even at the depths of his grief and fury and desperation to prove himself a true son of Asgard (to prove himself Thor’s equal), it had nearly made him sick to touch and hold it. To wield what he’d then considered his loathsome, hateful heritage.

He didn’t think he truly considered himself loathsome anymore. If he could define Thor by his choices and not his parentage, he could give himself the same courtesy.

At least, Loki thought so. It wasn’t easy.

He ignored the bit of him that whispered The Jotnar are hateful savage beasts; the Casket is a symbol of your allegiance, if you wield it you’ll never be anything but a monster to them.

“I’m already a monster,” he whispered, and watched his reflection in the mirror above the antique dresser as he consciously unraveled the spell hiding his Jotun self.

It was more than a glamour, more than an illusion cast in place of his own body. The spell was bound to every cell in his body, sunk into his skin and bones, ingrained in who he was, and it had been since he was a babe. He forced his eyes to stay open and his lungs to keep breathing as it grudgingly receded. A blue cast swirled over his skin, crept up his neck and jaw and down from his scalp, along his arms and around his shoulders. When it touched his eyes, his irises changed in a blink from violently green to a red the color of war.
His stomach turned.

Loki quelled the reaction and examined his own reflection. The raised lines in his skin that trailed along his cheekbones and around his eyes. He knew from experience that they ran down his spine as well, traced his ribs, accentuated his joints and the lines of his limbs and the backs of his hands.

Repulsive. Monstrous. Savage.

He cast those thoughts aside. He was Loki Laufeyson, heir to the Jotun throne, and the Casket of Eternal Winters was his birthright. Any of the Jotnar could use it but according to his research, it would only answer the call of the ruler or a member of his family.

Laufey was dead at Loki’s hand. The casket was his alone now.

Frigga had stripped it from him when Thor returned to them while Odin lay in his sleep and Laufey bled out on the floor. Loki had been too unstable at the time to take much notice. It would have been returned to the vaults by now. Placed back where it belonged—or, at least, where Odin said it belonged.

He called.

Over and over. For an hour.

In the end, Loki was left with nothing but a headache and his shame.
Chapter 177

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Classified Location], Pennsylvania, United States

May 2012

“I don’t remember the last time I was this tense,” Bucky muttered.

Natasha glanced at him sidelong, a hint of a smirk on her face. “Are you sure?”

He considered. “No.”

She laughed in the way he knew meant she was laughing on the inside. He let the right side of his mouth curve upwards in response. It wasn’t a full smile. He remembered smiling fully a long time ago, and then again as recently as last week, but there’d been puppet strings in his head up until last night when Loki and Wanda cut them off and the memory of his self being washed away by an ocean of cold overshadowed anything else.

Bucky knew they were worried about him. The half-smile was him trying. To come back to himself; to assure them that he might not be all right now, but he would be. One day.

The jet touched down with a bump, and he dragged himself back to the present.

Everyone on board vibrated with tension. Steve waited to Bucky’s left, stiff as a board and clad in his new black Stark Industries tactical gear, but unarmed. Natasha and Bucky were clothed similarly. Clint had stuck with his black-and-purple gear, and Tony wasn’t wearing armor at all—he’d managed to send multiple designer suits and shoes and ties with Darcy and Bruce and Pietro when they moved everyone out of the tower. He looked gloriously bored and arrogant. Jane and Helen had suits on that were professional but feminine, much nicer than anything Bucky remembered from the forties. Darcy had dressed simply, in black slacks and a sheer green shirt; Loki had chosen simple semiformal khakis and a dark gray button-down. They’d decided putting him in tact gear would be too threatening, since he was playing the victim.

Bucky thought about the video they’d made, and studied Loki’s expression now out of the corner of his eye. It was disturbing how well Loki could play the contrite, sorrowful, innocent, please have mercy on me victim.

He caught Bucky watching him and the mask vanished, to be replaced with a mocking smirk.

Bucky nodded back at him. He wasn’t afraid of Loki. They were on the same team.

“Remember,” Steve said. “If this is an ambush, we do not let them take us in again. Loki will get weapons into everyone’s holsters if it comes to that.”

Darcy leaned on the wall next to him. “Don’t take any shit but don’t dish it out either. Unless someone else starts it, in which case please, by all means, verbally eviscerate whoever was stupid enough to do that. This is a diplomatic mission to hash out the terms of our cooperation. And definitely don’t give them a clue about where the rest of the team is.”

Bucky nodded, even though they’d been over this already. It never hurt to review mission plans. He
thought back to the others waiting in Pennsylvania. Steve had convinced them that Wanda and Bruce’s presence would be too incendiary, and Bruce had agreed. Wanda hadn’t been happy about it, but Vision asked her to teach him how to cook while they were gone and she’d agreed.

He wasn’t going to let any of them come to harm.

Sam jogged back from the cockpit. He was dressed in a suit that, while nice, had clearly cost a fraction what Tony’s had. “All good. They’re waiting for us. Hull cams show no guns but there’s definitely a heavier troop presence than normal.”

“Let’s go,” Steve said. “Friday, drop the door.”

With a mechanical hum, the bay door began to lower.

Bucky sensed the soldiers outside coming even closer to the edges of their proverbial seats.

A group of people wearing expensive suits and pissy expressions waited on the roof of the UN building, wind whipping their hair. Not all of the members of the Avengers Task Force, but most.

Bucky decided this idiotic committee would be the first to go after everything was said and done.

They filed out of the jet and clustered together in front of the task force.

“Rogers,” Ross said.

Steve didn’t nod. “Ross.”

Ross glanced around at the rest of them. Bucky was happy to see that he had a bruise on his cheekbone and was holding his left arm stiffly. “Only half the gang today?”

Darcy smiled sweetly. “Not all of us were so eager to see you, I’m afraid.”

Ross’ lips thinned.

“That’s not entirely surprising,” someone observed. Bucky craned his neck and found a familiar face. Two, actually.

“Sabina,” Darcy said. “I hadn’t heard you made the task force.”

Prescott shrugged. A few of her fellows shifted to let her step forward and shake Darcy’s hand. “Recent posting. I thought I’d surprise you.”

“You know Ambassador Prescott already, I see,” Ross said, looking like he’d rather suck lemons than have this conversation. “And Mr. Coulson and Secretary General Berntsen.”

“Hello,” said the man Bucky knew as Phil from Maria and Coulson from Nat. He had a pleasantly unreadable face and Bucky suspected his unassuming demeanor was a large part of what made him so dangerous. He made a note not to overlook or underestimate the slight, balding man.

Berntsen only dipped his head very slightly. He was clearly still miffed about the whole escape thing. Bucky caught the man’s eye and smiled just a little. Berntsen glared but took a step back.

“I’d like to introduce you to Ambassador Rahal of Saudi Arabia, Ambassador Ni of China, Ambassador Ríos of Brazil, Ambassador Marsh of the United Kingdom, and Ambassador Verreau of France,” he said. “Our other consultants are Dr. Laura Krause, Dr. Jakub Gorski, Sir Ian Stone, and General Spencer.”
Bucky fixed their names to their faces in his mind. He knew Natasha would be doing the same. Darcy had briefed them all before they left the safe house; all the UN ambassadors except Ríos and Verreau disliked the Avengers and, and the ‘consultants’ were all on the fence. Consultant, Darcy had said with a contemptuous look on her face, was a new position they’d made up purely to get more people on the task force, chosen by the task force mostly to add credibility to its decisions but not actually change them.

“Pleased to meet you,” Steve said. He’d gotten better at lying but Bucky could still loud and clear exactly how little he meant that statement. “For those of you who haven’t actually met, this is Tony Stark, Dr. Helen Cho, Dr. Jane Foster, Darcy Lewis, James Barnes, Natasha Romanoff, Sam Wilson, Clint Barton, and Loki of Asgard.”

There was a barely perceptible pause before he rattled off Loki’s name, and a very perceptible increase in tension as the UN people who’d been very obviously ignoring Loki were forced to acknowledge his polite half-bow. He cast a warm smile at the group. “It’s a pleasure to come before you as myself, after all this time. I offer my sincerest apologies for the deception around my true identity.”

God damn, he’s good.

They were clearly disarmed by the honesty. Ross coughed into his fist. Coulson was smiling.

Ambassador Ni was the first to return Loki’s slight bow. “We understand why you considered it necessary to deceive us.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how much of that video was true?” Sir Stone said, casting a skeptical look at Loki. “He’s an illusionist. For all we know, they’re walking arsenals and this is a setup.”

“Weren’t you already planning to walk us through the metal detectors?” Natasha said innocently. “And the electromagnetic wave disruptors, and the remote detonators in case any of us is rigged with a suicide vest, and a full pat-down, while we’re separated by lead-lined walls?”

Bucky almost laughed at the look on Marsh and Ross’ faces when she said that. The plans for scanning the Avengers were detailed, complicated, and classified. Or supposed to be. He and Natasha had excellent sources, and so did Darcy, on the other side of the coin.

“How do you know that?” Ross demanded.

Natasha shrugged. “I hear things, Secretary. Sometimes those things are classified. It’s hardly my fault your department is as watertight as a sieve. May we proceed?”

Bucky heard something that sounded suspiciously like Sam Wilson choking back laughter.

“Please,” Ross said tightly.

They walked in an awkward silence to the roof access doors. These new UN facilities in Berlin were clearly designed to accommodate entrance from above; the access doors were large, glass, automatic, bulletproof, and led straight to a large elevator. The task force people filed into it.

With the exception of Coulson.

“I’d like to speak with them,” he said, and waved his colleagues on.

When the elevator doors closed, he glanced at Loki.
“They’ll hear and see you challenging us to reveal the location of our safe house, and us refusing,” Loki said briskly. He’d dropped the mask and was returning the canny examination Coulson was giving him. Bucky decided it would maybe be a bad plan to let these two team up. “Whatever you need to say, fear not electronic or biological watchers.”

“Thank you,” Coulson said, and turned to the rest of them. “Rogers, Romanoff, Mr. Wilson, good to see you again. I’m glad to see you’re all healing well—I presume that’s your doing?” he added to Helen.

She nodded once. Her expression didn’t change from the cool impassivity she’d worn since the jet opened.

“Impressive. Dr. Foster, we meet again,” Coulson said, with genuine warmth in his voice.

Jane grinned at him. “Don’t even think about stealing my research. It’s protected by Stark Industries this time.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Coulson said. “But thanks for the segue. Mr. Stark, be certain to add a clause in whatever agreement you make today that leaves your position as CEO of SI legally untouchable. They’re going to try to take it away from you; they know full well it’s the source of much of your team’s resources.”

“Fantastic,” Tony said.

Darcy shrugged. “We expected that, but thanks for the tip.”

“Of course,” Coulson said.

The elevator dinged open. They filed inside. Bucky had to remind himself to loosen his shoulders before they cramped. He didn’t like elevators at all. Stairwells were risky, since they offered little concealment and limited exit routes, but elevators were worse on both counts on top of being metal boxes hanging over what was often a lethal drop.

Coulson looked at Steve and Clint. “I like the new gear.”

“Courtesy of Tony,” Steve said.

“ Mostly,” Clint added. “We told him what we wanted and he made it happen, with some upgrades. How’s the UN treating you?”

“Better than Hydra, worse than SHIELD,” Coulson said. “I miss my autonomy, but I figured you guys needed a voice on the inside, or I wouldn’t have taken this position.” He shook his head. “Too much indecisive nonsense going on around here.”

Bucky decided he liked Coulson. Not trust, not yet, but he could see why this man had been so high in SHIELD and remained so high in Natasha’s estimation.

“How are the kids?” Coulson asked quietly.

Clint rocked a hand. “So-so. Most of them are geared up ready to burn shit down, preferably shit with United Nations embossed on it in fancy lettering.”

“But you’re not letting them?” Coulson said.

“Of course not,” Steve said.
No, we only promised them they’d have to wait until they’re 16 and/or Thanos is dealt with, Bucky thought with grim pleasure, remembering the stop they’d made on the way here.

“And you got them all out?”

“Yep,” Tony said. “All safe and sound. One of ‘em’s from New York, actually. Queens. A lot of the others didn’t know where their abilities came from, but he said he was bitten by a radioactive spider?”

“Accident at Oscorp fourteen months ago, if memory serves,” Coulson said promptly.

Natasha shifted her feet.

“Gonna have a baby spider to look after, Natasha,” Sam said with a grin.

“Thank you,” Coulson said.

The elevator slowed, then opened onto a horribly familiar hallway. Bucky remembered being dragged through here in a titanium straitjacket that he suspected he could’ve broken, if they hadn’t been holding some kind of electricity weapon to both Natasha and Steve’s spines that they’d already discovered caused immense pain. The hallway was just as heavily lined with soldiers now as it had been then. Bucky rolled his left wrist at the memory of the straitjacket and scowled at a few of them. It was a comfort that he was here with his teammates and that they could fight their way out if they had to, particularly with Loki on their side, but every step was nonetheless a struggle.

Based on the barely visible tension around Natasha’s lips, she felt the same, but that was all she’d show of it. A tell he knew was invisible to anyone else. Except probably Clint and Loki, the one because he knew her so well and the other because he was creepy as hell and had a thousand years of practice reading faces.

Ross’ group was already halfway down the hall. Darcy glanced around and set off briskly after them. Bucky watched Coulson’s attention track after her with focused curiosity.

He deliberately shifted between Coulson and Darcy as the rest of them followed her down the hall.

Ross had chosen a conference room in one of the facility’s top floors. It was large, but clearly not designed for more than fifty people.

“Coffee and some courtesy snacks are on the table,” Sabina Prescott said with a graceful gesture. Bucky had clocked the tables of fruit, muffins, granola bars, and coffeepots as soon as they walked in, and dismissed them just as quickly.

“Thanks,” Darcy said. None of them moved.

Ambassador Rahal broke the tense silence. “Why don’t we all sit down?”

Ross didn’t move.

Bucky resisted the urge to roll his eyes, pulled out a chair, and sat down. They didn’t need to bother with Ross’ games of I’m in control so you sit down first. None of them was so insecure they’d fall for it. And it was always possible that Ross would slip up if he thought he had the other hand.

Natasha, Darcy, and Loki must have been thinking something similar, because they sat at almost the
exact same time. Ross waited until all the Avengers had chosen seats along one side of the long rectangular table before he pulled out a chair in the middle of the opposite side.

Placing people opposite one another makes them more antagonistic, Loki noted in Bucky’s mind. He tried not to flinch. Bucky knew all the Avengers would hear him as well; they’d agreed beforehand to use Loki as a switchboard for unnoticeable communication. If any of them thought at him with intent for it to be spread to the rest of the team, he’d hear, and share it. Or something to that extent.

A second later, Darcy’s response came through, somehow flavored with her voice even though it was all mental. He’s maybe trying to make us look bad or sabotage this meeting by pitting us against the task force. We’re supposed to be allies.

They cut themselves off as the consultants found seats near the ends of the table.

“Let’s skip the pleasantries,” Marsh said brusquely. “You claim we need your assistance to fight the alien parasites, and you want to broker a truce so we can all fight together like best friends forever.”

“We don’t expect friendship,” Steve said. “We expect that you’ll be pragmatic enough to form an alliance.”

“The United States and the United Kingdom have a long history of allying with one villain to eliminate a worse one,” Natasha said, glancing at Marsh, Stone, Spencer, and Ross. “I hardly think we’re anywhere near as difficult to work with as the Soviets, the Shah, Fidel Castro, King Hussein of Jordan, and all the other cruel regimes you’ve tolerated for the sake of a grander objective.”

Bucky wanted to take her hand beneath the table, but there were likely surveillance devices concealed all around the room and they couldn’t show any sign of him and Natasha being any more than allies.

Gorski tapped the table. “You make an excellent point.”

Bucky recalled that he was Polish; the Poles weren’t overly fond of either Germany or Russia at this point. Made sense that he’d see Nat’s logic. Rahal, on the other hand, looked irritated, probably at the mention of the Shah. Luckily he stayed silent.

“This is different,” Stone said.

Darcy shrugged. “Doesn’t seem that different to me. You don’t like us much. We’re not overly fond of you at the moment either, but that’s a problem for another day. We have a common enemy and the combined forces of Earth will have serious trouble without the Avengers’ help. It’s really not that complicated, Secretary.”

“I’m not the Secretary of State anymore,” Ross said. “I’ve been appointed Director of this task force.”

Natasha tensed, almost imperceptibly. Director. Like Director Fury. Unfortunate choice of title.

“Sorry,” Darcy said, with a toothy smile. “My bad.”

Bucky was fairly sure the slip had been deliberate.

“And afterward?” General Spencer said, skepticism coating his voice. “You know we can’t just… let you walk away. You have to face justice for… your crimes.”
“Crimes?” Sam said. “Look, General, I know what constitutes a war crime. Turning on your countrymen in a civilian population because you were hit with a hallucinogen doesn’t count.”

“You have no proof that that’s what happened,” Ambassador Ni countered.

“Watch the footage,” Clint said. “It’s pretty clear that the Hulk who showed up in Anchorage is not the same one who fought the Chitauri in New York, or busted a drug cartel in New Mexico while saving half our team’s lives.”

“I also have a tox report,” Helen said smoothly. “I’m a doctor, as is Bruce Banner. We understand how these things work.”

Bucky scanned the faces on the other side of the table. Ríos and Verreau were nodding; Gorski looked on the fence, Ambassador Ni seemed to be watching Helen with approval, and General Spencer, Bucky thought, could be persuaded by the strategic pragmatism of an alliance. Dr. Krause, Sir Stone, Marsh, Rahal, and Ross, though—they weren’t changing their minds about the Avengers anytime soon.

“There’s one more thing.” Steve’s voice brooked no argument. “We’ll expect the registration resolution to be dropped permanently.”

“No,” Dr. Krause said instantly.

Steve spread his hands. “You’re not in a position to make ultimatums, Doctor. You need us. We need you, but not much.”

Darcy leaned forward. “How many of your soldiers are really going to try to arrest Captain America, the Black Widow, Hawkeye, Falcon, Iron Man, Vision, the Scarlet Witch, and Quicksilver? Even if they wanted to, who’d be brave enough to try? If you turn this offer of alliance down, we’ll still be there fighting Thanos. That, you can count on. You only inconvenience yourselves and us and therefore endanger everyone on the planet if you leave those arrest warrants standing. But since we’re willing to smooth things over, if you drop the registry idea, we’ll ally with you fully, and Banner, Rogers, Wilson, Barton, Romanoff, Wanda Maximoff, and Barnes will stand trial after this is over. Trial, Director.” She gave Ross a nasty smirk. “Not some bureaucratic indictment handed down from on high. I want an international jury and livestreamed proceedings for the world.”

Ross looked like the lemon in his mouth had suddenly turned poisonous.

“So,” Prescott said, “in exchange for us dropping the registry plan, those members of the Avengers you broke out of the prison days ago have agreed to turn themselves in once Thanos is defeated and subject themselves to our justice. So long as it’s actually justice this time. During the battle, we’re to work with you to defeat Thanos, because we need you and you need the Earth’s armies.”


“What about him?” Ross asked.

“Who?” Darcy said, brows furrowed.

“…Loki.”

“Are you talking about a potted plant or a person?” Sam said.

A muscle in Ross’ jaw jumped. Bucky swallowed a laugh. He really wished Sam wasn’t funny on top of being annoying.
It seemed to take Ross an effort to look Loki in the eyes.

General Spencer had no such qualms. “What are you going to do after Thanos has been defeated?” he said bluntly, holding Loki’s gaze. Bucky was reluctantly impressed by the hard-faced American general.

Loki cocked his head, expression unusually pleasant. “I hope to return to life in Avengers Tower with the rest of my team, and continue Avenging in whatever capacity we agree upon today.”

“No more mass murdering psychopathic delusions?”

“Of course not. I no more aspire to rule Midgard than I do to sprawl into a nest of fire ants devoid of clothing. Any such aspirations were... belonged to Thanos, when he used me as his tool.”

Somehow, he managed to inject pain, discomfort, sorrow, and regret into the end of his little speech. Bucky had been impressed by Loki in the video, apologizing for having disguised himself as Liam Hillworth and explaining everything that had happened to him in such a way that even Bucky had started to think his edge of madness and chaos, the constant subtle impression that Loki was just waiting for an excuse to burn shit to the ground, was all a lie, that he was this warmhearted victimized person in need of protection. He’d known Loki was a master manipulator, liar, and actor—as good or better, even, than Natasha. But this performance here was more impressive still.

“Our laws don’t officially cover aliens,” Coulson said finally. “There’s no precedent. Technically you’re not a citizen of any country on Earth—”

“Technically, he’s an illegal immigrant,” Marsh said.

Spencer chuckled. “Whole new meaning to the term ‘illegal alien’.”

“You may consider me a visiting foreign dignitary if you so choose,” Loki said. “I will utilize proper channels of authority to make my presence here on Midgard official, and gain a temporary residence authorization, if that is what you ask of me.”

“And what if we ask you to leave?” Marsh said.

Rahal shot her a look.

Marsh ignored him.

“I’ll do so,” Loki answered immediately. “Though I regret to say I insist upon staying until the threat Thanos poses has been nullified. I would see him brought to justice for what he has done to me and so many others.”

_Brilliant performance._ Bucky tried as hard as he could to send the thought Loki’s way.

The response came almost instantly, and was tinged with the same impression Loki’s real smile always left, the terrifying and slightly unhinged one. _I try._

“What if we asked you to stand trial as well?” Stone said.

Loki raised an eyebrow. “I wasn’t aware that compulsion performed by science beyond your current capacity to understand is considered a crime on Midgard.”

“We’ve yet to establish that’s the truth,” Stone retorted.

“Do you not have devices that detect lies?”
“Polygraph,” Darcy supplied.

“I hear there’s a new one that uses MRI,” Clint said.

Natasha smiled, sphinxlike. “There is. Highly classified, extremely reliable, and exorbitantly expensive, but I suspect they might make the effort in this unusual instance.”

Ross choked. “How do you know about that!”

“As I said, Director,” Natasha said. “Government bureaucracies with this many people in them? Secrets are water, and this organization is a sieve.”

“I expect the names of your sources as part of this agreement,” Ross said. “Today.”

“Of course,” Natasha said smoothly.

Ross frowned. Probably he was suspicious about how easily Natasha had agreed. Bucky was already running through the list of contacts he and Natasha had amassed over the years and considering how best to protect them; Natasha had a better mental database since she hadn’t been a popsicle for a while and then an amnesiac for almost a year. They’d give names of people they could afford to lose, or of people who’d never fed them information at all, but between the two of them and Tony they could fake enough evidence to keep Ross off the track of the real moles.

“Would you be willing to submit yourself to a polygraph?” Spencer asked Loki. He, Coulson, and Prescott were the only members of the task force who seemed able to talk directly to Loki without visible trouble.

“I would be willing to answer certain questions in a polygraph,” Loki clarified. “Specifically, questions that will confirm everything we’ve told you here.”

“What about the rest of you?” Rahal said.

Darcy grinned. “As of yet, the fMRI polygraph isn’t admissible in any court, so I’m not sure how it would help.”

“And even if it was, the answer would still be no,” Steve said.

Ross rubbed a hand over his face. “I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this,” he muttered.

“The body of the Daavit we brought back wasn’t enough of a reason?” Bucky said.

“I won’t tolerate this from you,” Ross said. “You’re a traitor, a war criminal, a spy, and an assassin who has served some of the worst people humanity ever produced.”

“Ross, enough,” Ríos said angrily.

Sam leaned forward so he could glare better at Ross. “Seriously? You people overlook crimes all the time when you turn spies and informants from enemy regimes, and he didn’t even do any of this shit voluntarily! He was brainwashed, programmed, and tortured into doing bad shit and resisted so much that they had to turn him into an icicle for a decade, then when he woke up he quit hurting people, and even when they pushed his buttons last week, he bolted and wasn’t going to hurt anyone. And you still want to call him a war criminal?”

Bucky blinked in shock.

“We explained all this in our video,” Darcy said. “The people of the world know our side. They’re
not going to swallow the Avengers-are-bad-guys line so easily anymore.”

“That video constitutes another crime,” Rahal said indifferently. “Hacking is—”

“Illegal, which is why I would never,” Tony said. “We put the video up on a website run from my servers, totally legit. It’s hardly our fault someone took it and hacked their way into every major media site.”

“You’re telling us you had nothing to do with that?” Marsh snapped.

Tony faked shock. “You know, I think I am saying we had nothing to do with it! Thanks so much for helping me clear that up—”

“Enough,” Ross snarled.

“Are you sure? Because I can keep going,” Tony said, with overblown sincerity. His eyes were wide and mockingly innocent.

“He really can,” Clint said. “Seriously. Really deep hell pit of annoyingness.”

“Hey,” Tony said. “It’s not ‘really deep,’ it’s bottomless.”

Clint snorted. “Right, my bad.”

Ríos and Spencer looked like they were hiding smiles.

“We need someone to draw up this agreement and sign it,” Ross said. “I’ll find an intern—”

“You’ll put together a team, send them the complete recordings of this meeting, and schedule a conference call with us,” Darcy said. “Within five hours. Meanwhile, General Spencer, you can put together a group of people to work with our combat specialists here to start figuring out a battle plan while we work on the legal part. Sound good? Yeah? Awesome.”

Verreau stared at Darcy like she was his new life goal. Coulson and Prescott were both smiling. General Spencer looked reluctantly impressed. Ross, Stone, and Marsh all looked like she was something nasty they’d gotten stuck to their shoe in a public restroom. Darcy didn’t seem to care in the slightest.

“Is that all?” Ross said stiffly.

“No, actually,” Darcy said. “We’d love rooms here. Free of any kind of surveillance, and no guards, and all on the same hallway. If you don’t have guest facilities, I’d love if some of your people could find us a nice hotel near here. I’m sure you know the best spots better than we would.”

“Are we sure they’re not eavesdropping?” Clint said.

“I swept this place for bugs,” Natasha said. “Three times.” Her tone of voice implied Clint should stop questioning her debugging skills.

“And I’ve spelled every inch of it,” Loki added. “It’s quite a nice guest suite, really. We could have brought two more people.”

“Not really, Helen and I have already taken over one of the rooms,” Jane said absently.
“Ooooh,” Clint and Tony said in unison.

Jane blushed furiously.

“Your maturity levels are shockingly juvenile,” Helen said, unperturbed, as she walked back into the guest suite’s massive shared living room. “We have a bevy of scientific equipment we brought with us.”

“I’m tracking… portals,” Jane said. “They’re not quite Einstein-Rosen bridges, but there are a lot of similarities. I think it’s a quantum tunneling effect, kind of, and there’s definitely something going on with the Planck constant, and the whole seidr thing comes in too, I’ve only ever studied Loki’s and it seems to be a bit different with each mage, which makes any kind of calculations ridiculously difficult—”

“Jane,” Darcy said with a grin. “Short version.”

Bucky almost forgot what they were talking about when he looked over his shoulder and saw Darcy and Loki on the couch together, with Loki’s arm tucked firmly around her shoulders.

“Right. I’m trying to get a lock on where and how large the portals are,” Jane said.

“Think you can do it?” Steve walked out of his room. He’d changed into casual clothes—sweats and a cotton T-shirt—for the evening. Bucky fully intended to emulate him as soon as Natasha came out of the room they’d taken—she had kicked him out to get a few minutes alone. Which he didn’t mind. She was a very solitary person, deep down, and even his presence could be grating to her sometimes.

“Excuse you,” Jane said.

Steve grinned. “Let me rephrase. Can you do it in time to find any new portals if Thanos starts a sneak attack from somewhere we haven’t found yet?”

“Possibly,” Jane said. “Probably.” She whacked the black box in her hands, made a face, and retreated to the bedroom that had been turned into a lab. Helen followed. Bucky could just make out Jane’s auburn hair bobbing on the other side of a large coppery apparatus that looked like it was taking up most of the bed.

“She’s quite brilliant,” Tony said.

“Hold up,” Sam said. “Did you just compliment the intelligence of someone who isn’t you?”

Tony arched a brow in his direction. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t worry,” Sam said. “I recorded that.”

“You did not,” Tony said.

Bucky looked at Loki. “No, but he did.”

Loki grinned and held up a small black microphone.

“Asshole,” Tony said without malice.

Bucky returned Loki’s smile.

Darcy started asking Tony questions about how well he’d covered his tracks on the virus. Under cover of Tony’s indignant response, Bucky sidled over to Sam.
“Hey,” he said.

Sam gave him a look like why are you talking to me?

“Thanks,” Bucky said. “For—back there. Having my back. Against the task force.”

“Of course I had your back,” Sam said, sounding almost irritated, but there was a new softness around his eyes Bucky hadn’t seen before. “We’re teammates. That’s how it works.”

“But you don’t like me,” Bucky said.

“Do I think you’re kind of a dick? Sure.” Sam took a sip of his beer and looked at Steve. He was sitting on the couch with a drink in hand, smiling a little while Tony and Darcy bantered. “But he trusts you, and you trust him, and it’s pretty obvious you guys would be gay for each other if Natasha weren’t in the picture—”

Bucky let out a surprised laugh.

“—so do I have a problem with you being around? Nope.” Sam raised his eyebrows at Bucky. “That all?”

Bucky opened his mouth. Closed it. Shook his head and walked away, unwilling to let Sam see the smile that threatened to break across his face.

Jane’s voice floated out into the living room. “What the fuck?”

Steve and Bucky shot each other a startled look. Jane almost never swore.

“Uh,” Helen called, “guys, you’re going to want to see this.”

They crowded into the bedroom.

Jane blinked up at them. Her face was stunned. “I, uh. There’s a… time delay on this reading, apparently. Which is useful, I can calibrate it now, but—we picked something up that’s… not a portal. That’s a little bigger than a portal, actually.”

Loki sucked in a sharp breath.

Bucky didn’t understand.

“The Bifrost?” Darcy said softly.

Jane bit her lip and nodded, looking at Loki.

He closed his eyes. “Thor.”

“You don’t know that,” Darcy said.

Someone slammed on the door to their room.

“I’m fairly certain that I do,” Loki said coldly.

Bucky could literally see Loki dragging his icy shell back in place. Could watch the set of his features change. Locking away every possible emotion behind a mask of disdain, amusement, mockery, and indifference.
He didn’t think it was Loki hiding from them. He thought Loki was preparing now because he was in no way ready to face his brother.

Bucky’s fingers itched for a knife or a gun. Loki wasn’t the most open of people, but he’d dropped enough hints, told enough stories, to make it clear that Thor had never treated him as an equal. Had taken him for granted and overlooked him and mocked him and shunned him. That wasn’t family; that was just being a self-centered asshole.

If Thor tried to kill Loki—

Tony yanked open the door. “What,” he snapped.

The man on the other side paled when he saw Tony’s and Bucky’s faces framed in the doorway, and behind them, Loki, who was definitely in Terrifying Mode. “Uh,” he said. “I’ve been… you’re wanted. On the roof. The—other—one from space. Is here.”


He slammed the door in the man’s face.

They all turned to look at Loki.

“What do you want to do?” Steve said.

Loki blinked. “Hm?”

“Leave? Negotiate? Kill him? Unless there’s another option beyond those three, in which case please enlighten me,” Clint said. “If you don’t want to face him, great, portal out of here and we’ll shout him down. If you want to kill him—”

“—hold off until later, please,” Darcy said, more kindly than Bucky had been expecting. She stepped directly in front of Loki. He took a deep breath and tucked his chin, meeting her eyes. “I wouldn’t blame you. But it’s… not a smart move right now.”

“But if he comes after you, we’re backing you,” Clint added. “Just to be clear.”

Loki stared at all of them. Skeptically.

“Oh come off it,” Sam said. “Is it really so surprising that we’re on your side here? Friendship. This is how it works.”

Natasha walked out of her room.

“Friendship normally extends to willingness to commit murder?” Loki said drily.

Sam shrugged. “Hey, none of us in here has clean hands. Except maybe Darcy and Jane and Helen.”

Darcy choked. “Dude, if we’re doing sin counts, you’d be shocked by mine.”

Sam looked slightly unnerved.

“Who are we killing?” Natasha said, propping an elbow on Clint’s shoulder.

“Thor showed up,” Clint said. “Loki needs to make up his mind about how we’re handling this before—”
“Where is he!” someone bellowed down the hall.

Clint winced. “That happens.”

“I shall need to face him sometime,” Loki said, drawing a deep breath. “Do not kill him. He could be useful in the coming battle; he is a formidable warrior.”

“If he tries to kill you, we do what we have to,” Natasha said. “Other than that, sure. Tony, want to do the honors?”

Tony smiled like a snake. “Gladly.”

He ripped open the door.

The same man as before toppled backwards into the room.

“Funny seeing you again,” Tony said, like he’d just had a party guest make an unexpected reappearance.

A second later, Thor filled up the doorframe. Bucky heard scrambling and shouting in the hall behind him, possibly someone with a megaphone, possibly Ross with a megaphone, but he didn’t care.

“Loki,” Thor growled, and stalked into the room.

“Whoa,” Tony said, stepping smartly in front of him. Bucky jumped to his shoulder and Steve went straight to Tony’s other side. Natasha came around by Bucky and raised her eyebrows at Thor, supremely unimpressed.

He glared at them all. “Move.”

“Sorry,” Tony said, not sounding at all sorry. “Didn’t your mother ever teach you to knock? I mean, please. We could have been sleeping.”

Thor seemed so affronted by this display, so flabbergasted by people not getting out of his way, that he was actually speechless for several seconds.

“What, didn’t expect us to be voluntarily working with Loki?” Natasha drawled.

Thor’s expression changed.

“I think you nailed it,” Bucky said without taking his eyes off Thor.

Sam elbowed his way between Steve and Tony. “Look, man, no coercion here. Loki’s saved all our asses. We’ve saved his.”

“Debatable,” Loki muttered.

“Not helping,” Darcy hissed.

“And he’s a teammate, whereas you’re just the guy who killed Agent Coulson,” Tony said.

Thor looked uncomfortable. “Casualties of war—”

“Yeah, see, usually those are inflicted by enemies,” Tony said. “Not by allies with anger management issues. Your track record’s shit, so until you come in here without your murder face on,
we’re not getting out of the way.”

Thor took a deep breath. “I would speak with my brother alone.”

“What part of no are you not understanding?” Steve said angrily.

“It’s not a concept he’s familiar with,” Loki said.

Thor glared over Steve and Tony’s shoulders. He was tall enough that it actually worked. “Loki—”

“Let him in,” Loki said wearily.

Slowly, they stepped aside.

“Leave the weapon there,” Steve said.

Thor spun the hammer in his hand and set it on the floor just to the side of the threshold.

Ross was right on his heels. As Thor stepped into the room, Ross took his place in the doorway.

“What’s going on here?” he demanded.

“Sibling rivalry,” Clint said. “You know how it is. We’ll handle this. See you in the morning.”

He shut the door on Ross and the soldiers in the hallway.

Thor looked even more massive, and massively uncomfortable, now that they were all in one room.

“Let’s sit down,” Darcy said.

Sam picked an armchair.

Warily, they all found places around the coffee table. Darcy sat ramrod straight next to Loki. Bucky hadn’t noticed how much casual physical contact there was between the two of them until it was gone.

Thor ended up alone on a two-person couch, red cloak spread beneath him. He was incongruous in his glittering silver-and-black-and-red armor against the casual evening clothes the rest of them wore.

“I see that much has changed since I last visited Midgard,” he said at last.

No one responded.

“How… did this…” he gestured at them.

“How did what?” Clint said with a raised eyebrow.

Bucky suppressed a smile. They weren’t letting Thor off the hook that easily. Good.

He didn’t know Coulson all that well, and didn’t trust the man, but he did like him, and Steve and Natasha and Clint and even Jane seemed to know and value him, and Thor had killed him. That was enough in Bucky’s book to choose a side here, but on top of that, there was the way Thor had treated Loki. Bucky hadn’t been sure exactly how accurate the picture he had of Thor and Loki’s relationship was, but based on the fact that Thor had waltzed in expecting them all to hate Loki enough to just get out of the way—or been arrogant enough to assume they’d follow orders—or both—made it pretty damn clear Thor wasn’t a good brother.
Bucky had had a brother once. Not a good one. He knew what it looked like.

And he’d had a good brother once, if not by blood, named Steve Rogers.

“How did you come to be working together?” Thor said.

“Loki contacted me,” Darcy said. “He was sick of dodging Earth’s governments and Heimdall, and wanted a safe house. He gave us intel in exchange. He trailed around like a lost puppy for a few months and eventually got bored enough that we took him on some missions. Next thing you know, bam, best friends forever.”

Thor blinked. “That seems… abbreviated.”

“It is,” Darcy said. “The other details would take too long.”

“Intelligence on… what exactly?” Thor said.

Loki’s façade was firmly in place as he answered. Bucky had to keep reminding himself that it was a friend under there; the performance was convincing enough to almost make him doubt that Loki ever cared about them at all. The person sitting next to Darcy now—he wouldn’t care. Probably couldn’t.

“Thanos.”

Thor let out a breath, hard. “So Heimdall was correct.”

“Explain,” Natasha said.

“The Gatekeeper, the Watcher,” Thor said. “Heimdall. He guards the Bifrost, and operates it to send Asgard’s armies and diplomats around the universe. He informed the Allfather and myself a week ago that there are strange happenings on Midgard—a Daavi invasion, Nicholas Fury a traitor, the Avengers at odds with their world’s governments, and at the center of it all—Thanos, the mad Titan. Heimdall could not see him clearly, but he managed to get a glimpse that confirmed Midgard was in far greater danger than simply a squabble with a fairly primitive race.”

“Primitive?” Clint muttered.

“Thor refers to their culture,” Loki said. “The Daavi are formidable warriors, but alone, they fall relatively easily. It is only with a superior tactician in command that they become a significant threat, and the loyalty of the Daavi tribes is difficult to earn. I surmise Heimdall brought this concern to the Allfather before, and was dismissed until the question of Thanos’ involvement came to light.”

Thor looked away.

“Bastard,” Sam muttered.

“Do not speak so of Odin Allfather,” Thor growled.

“Get off your soapbox, Point Break,” Tony retorted.

Thor puffed up.

“Okay, anyway,” Clint said. “Any more questions?”

Thor’s lips thinned. “Loki, is it true that you were Thanos’ captive and thrall?”

“It is,” Loki said.
“And... you did not attempt to conquer Midgard of your own free will?”

“I did not.”

Thor heaved a sigh. “That makes things more complicated.”

Helen frowned. “I’d expect you to be glad to hear your brother’s not a criminal.”

“I am, but—” Thor looked at Loki. “It’s... a paradigm shift, is all.”

No one responded.

Thor’s right hand flexed. Bucky knew from the footage Thor could summon the hammer at will, and that it couldn’t be lifted by anyone else, so just the motion put him even more on edge.

“We’re working on a truce to fight with Earth’s armies,” Darcy said. “If your leash is long enough, we’d welcome your help. Or, hell, assistance from Asgard, if Odin’s willing to send anyone.”

Thor frowned. “He will not. He has determined Midgard to be an acceptable loss—he believes Thanos will be sated with conquering this realm, and that resistance might only incite him to slaughter the entire human population should he be victorious, which is a risk Asgard cannot take.”

“The hell?” Bucky said.

Darcy crossed her arms and spoke to no one in particular. “This is like reason number ten thousand and seventy-eight why I don’t like monarchies.”

“And since when has appeasement ever worked?” Bucky said.

“After having come here...” Thor looked down. “I... disagree. I will fight with you, if you will have me.”

“Humility,” Tony said. “What a shock. Didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Neither did I,” Loki said.

“Oh, so now you’ll disobey him?” Jane snapped.

Bucky’s eyes widened a fraction before he could control the reaction. Somehow in all the tension, he’d forgotten Jane and Thor’s history.

This should be good.

Thor looked even more awkward than before. “Jane, perhaps we ought to have this conversation later.”

“No, we can have it now,” Jane said. “Just so you don’t disappear and leave me hanging for another year.”

“I deserve that,” Thor said softly. “Jane, I intended to return and apologize for how I treated you. I—I simply had to convince Father. He disapproved of the match, and I have been speaking with him persistently. He’s softening on the subject; I believe he’d have granted permission for me to return and renew my courtship within a year—”

“Oh my God,” Jane said, an incredulous laugh chasing the words. Bucky wanted to look away but couldn’t. It was like a train wreck. “So you broke my heart, acted like a Class A asshole—”
“I have a categorizing system,” Darcy said proudly.

“—just so you, what, wouldn’t give me false hope or something, and you expected to just waltz back into my life and pick up where we left off? Thor, you might have forgotten, but two years isn’t all that short to mortals.”

“You said you loved me,” Thor said, and, impossibly, he sounded hurt.

Bucky wanted to deck him. He only held back because Jane didn’t seem to need the help and also he didn’t want to create a war zone in the middle of Berlin when he was trying so hard to get off the hook for being a criminal. Supposedly.

“Yeah,” Jane said. “You said you loved me, too. What if Odin never gave you permission, Thor? What then?”

Thor didn’t answer.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Find yourself an appropriate girlfriend from Asgard who’ll be willing to settle down and pop out heirs while she serves tea and crumpets.”

“There are no crumpets on Asgard,” Loki said, clearly amused. “And the queen’s duties extend to far more than heirs.”

Jane waved her hands around wildly. “That’s not the point! The point is, Thor? I’ve moved on.” She took Helen’s hand.

Thor gaped at them.

“Nine points for drama,” Tony said. “I’m docking one because you didn’t hit him this time.”

“This time?” Sam said.

“Oh, that’s a great story,” Darcy said with a grin. “When they broke up, Jane slapped him, and then I Tasered him.”

Sam looked at Tony. “Tell me you have footage of this.”

Tony grinned.

Thor glared at all of them.

“You’ll fight with us?” Steve checked, leaning forward.

Thor set his jaw. “Yes. I do not see how you will succeed, otherwise. Even with my assistance it is no sure thing.”

Loki was looking at him strangely. “I see you’ve learned caution while I’ve been in exile. How commendable.”

Thor looked away again.

Something seemed off about him. Bucky decided it was probably just that Thor was processing a lot of new and unexpected information at once.

But still…
“We can finalize the details of that tomorrow when we sign the agreement with Ross,” Steve said, glancing at Darcy. “Right now, I’d love to go to sleep. Thor, if you step outside, I’m sure Ross can find you another room.”

Thor looked at the obviously unoccupied tenth room. “I see.”

He rose. Looked around awkwardly.

They looked back with stony faces.

“Good night,” Thor said, and left.

As the door closed, tension visibly bled out of everyone’s postures.

Loki’s mask cracked, just a little.

Darcy propped an elbow on his shoulder and leaned into him. “Well, he’s no less of an annoying fuckboy than the last time I saw him.”

“Way to lay it on him, Jane,” Sam said. “Damn.”

Jane gave him a ghost of a smile. “Thanks.” She appeared to be gripping Helen’s hand quite hard, and Helen appeared to be returning the gesture. Bucky wasn’t sure when this had happened, and he never would’ve guessed their personalities would line up this way, but he was glad for them.

“Thank you,” Loki said softly.

Bucky blinked at him.

Loki seemed, for possibly the first time since Bucky had met him, to have dropped all his layers. Like he was so drained from facing Thor that he didn’t want to bother even hiding how upset he was. He looked vulnerable. “For standing up for me.”

“He’s an asshole,” Tony said.

“He’s an asshole for whom everyone I ever befriended cast me aside,” Loki said. “So… thank you. For not doing so.”

“That’s family,” Bucky said.

No one disagreed.

Chapter End Notes

The Mightily Annoying Thor Returns!
United Nations’ New World Headquarters, Berlin, Germany

May 2012

He woke with a jolt, seidr flaring.

*Calm yourself*, Thanos said into his mind. *I’m not here to hurt you or your mortal lover.*

Loki steadied himself. Darcy, next to him, didn’t move—she slept like she’d been drugged.

He could feel Thanos’ presence. It was strong in the room but there was no malice to it—the Titan’s mind was far less guarded in this state. He was mind-traveling, just as Loki had done.

Loki reached out to him. *Then why have you come?*

*I have information for you. *

*And why would you want to give me information? You may not have noticed, but we’re on opposite sides.*

Amusement flared in Thanos’ mind. *So we are. For the moment.*

*I will not betray them.*

*What if I told you Thor came here on Odin’s orders, to capture you and the rest of the Avengers?*

Loki paused. *He would not dare. Me, perhaps, but not the others.*

*Oh, but he does dare. Odin is an old fool,* Thanos said. *You know it as well as I.*

*Thor has not done anything threatening—* 

*There is a strike force on its way, moving more slowly because they are bringing the necessary accoutrements to contain the Avengers,* Thanos said. *Thor was tasked with coming here and making sure none of you left before their arrival.*

Loki tamped down his rage. Thanos could be lying.

But his consciousness was *right there*. And Loki knew from experience that it was almost impossible to lie without detection while communicating directly mind-to-mind like this.

*How can you be so certain?* he asked finally.

*I have a squadron of Daavi following them,* Thanos said. *And I have my sources inside Asgard. Not particularly well placed as of yet, but high enough to hear about this mission.*

*I assume you want something in exchange for this information.*

*Not really,* Thanos said. *But I’m willing to offer you a trade. I showed you what we could do together the last time we spoke. Do you remember?*
The vision Thanos had sent him rose all too clearly to Loki’s mind. Conquering Asgard—

Yes, he said cautiously.

You can have that, Thanos said. I underestimated you. I acted too hastily before. You would be a worthy lieutenant and partner, rather than a slave, and I do apologize for how I treated you before. Work with me now, and you can take the fight to the people who’ve abandoned you time and time again. You can watch that false brother of yours fall in battle. He’s here to take you prisoner, Laufeyson. What loyalty do you owe him?

None, Loki said harshly.

All you have to do is let the Aesir take you and your team prisoner tomorrow. Attach a tracking spell to one of your fully mortal teammates; the Aesir will overlook them and I’ll follow the tracking spell right to their ship. You will join me, and I’ll take the Avengers prisoner. You can even keep your human woman, if you like—I care nothing for their lives. Midgard will fall to us, and then, once it is subdued, so will Asgard.

All I ask in exchange is the Avengers.

Loki was tempted. More than tempted. And he knew Thanos could feel it.

Are you going to kill them?

Certainly not, Thanos said. Unless they try to escape and are wounded in the attempt. The Avengers could be useful pawns. Surely you could convince at least a few of them to turn. And the others… We can keep them alive, if they matter so much to you.

Loki closed his eyes.

Consider it, Thanos said.

You’re only telling me about the Aesir plans to manipulate me, Loki said. I’m not a fool.

Of course that’s why I’m telling you, Thanos replied. That doesn’t mean I am lying. Or wrong. You will see, tomorrow, whether I told you the truth. Create a tracking spell that will only come to life after a certain period of time in the company of multiple Aesir—I know you’re capable of it. Listen to them tomorrow. Thor requested that you die by his own hand should you be sentenced to execution on Asgard. Then we’ll see.

Leave me, Loki said flatly.

The sensation of a smile drifted between them. As you wish. I’ll leave you with this—I know you want revenge on me, Loki of Jotunheim, but what do you want more—revenge on me, or revenge on the family who betrayed you, and a chance to earn you rightful throne?

The next second, Loki was once again alone in his own mind.

He looked down at Darcy’s sleeping form. She’d fallen asleep nude when they were done, and the sheets had pulled down around her navel. Sleeping, she looked peaceful and young and vulnerable in a way that vanished when her eyes opened every morning.

She was brilliant and brave and clever, but she wasn’t a fighter. She had little to no combat experience beyond self-defense lessons from the other Avengers; certainly not enough to see her through a war. Loki was so afraid of losing her.
“I will keep you alive,” he whispered. “I will conquer cities, end lives, and burn worlds if I must. I will see you through this.”

He rested a hand lightly on her back. Darcy curved slightly into his touch, sighed, and settled deeper into the pillows.

Loki thought of hours spent laughing and sharing pizza and sushi and ice cream and sandwiches and takeout Thai food with the other Avengers. Of Thor’s endless dismissals of his opinions; Odin’s disappointment; the scorn of the Einherjar and the Warriors Three. Of Thanos whipping him until his back was a flayed slab of meat and handing him an opportunity to conquer Midgard. Of that vision, in which he led an army against Asgard, and ruled it until the end of time.

He considered the time spent on Midgard with the Avengers a gift, sent from the Norns or created by chance he did not know, but in the grand scheme of his life it was a tiny fraction of the time he’d lived. And of the time he had yet to live. Loki closed his eyes and a hundred thousand memories replayed across the backs of his eyelids, enough to make him wish momentarily that his mind was a weaker thing. He remembered with perfect clarity every time he’d been brushed aside, every time he’d imagined kneeling while Thor sat on the throne of Asgard and swallowed bile, every time they’d shunned him. He remembered his books being thrown in the mud as a child, his spells disrupted as an adolescent, his fighting style mocked by the entire order of Einherjar, led by his brother.

He opened his eyes and began tracing runes on Darcy’s bare skin, certain she would not wake.

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter, yes, but a momentous one :)
Chapter 179

United Nations’ New World Headquarters, Berlin, Germany

May 2012

He ran down a long hallway. Somewhere ahead of him was the door. Steve didn’t know what it looked like or where it led, but he knew he had to get there and open it; he knew he had to leave this cramped building with the confusing rooms and doorless thresholds and claustrophobic passageways that twisted around and back in on themselves. If he could only find the door, if he could only keep running long enough, he could get out.

His feet pounded beneath him. One, two. One, two. One—

He flipped upright. Landed on the floor in a fighting stance and blinked, brain scrambling to figure out what was happening.

The pounding wasn’t running feet; it was someone at the door. He was in the United Nations headquarters. Ross. Treaties they meant to break. A fight to plan for.

Steve tugged sweats on over his boxers and yanked the door open with a shirt in hand. “What?”

“Hello,” Darcy said, giving his bare chest an appreciative look. “Dude. It’s a good thing you don’t go to a normal gym; no one would get any work done.”

“Darcy,” Steve said. “Aren’t you dating Loki?”

She gave him a wicked grin. “Am I?”

He paused.

“Get dressed,” Darcy said. “Like really dressed. War suit and shit. Fury’s army is attacking.”

Steve swore and shut the door on her amused face.

It took ten minutes before they were geared up for a fight and heading at a jog through the halls of the facility.

Initial intelligence suggested the attacks had been heaviest in Canada and Alaska, so the Avengers shipped out for there. American military had the highest percentage of compromised units, since it had been most closely integrated with SHIELD and therefore Hydra. They’d meet a helicopter over Maine and transfer out to get Sharon, Pietro, Maria, Wanda, Vision, and Bruce if he was ready to fight, and send Darcy, Jane, and Helen back to the Tower since they didn’t fight.

The helicopter buzzed up to the jet’s rear bay door while it hovered over rolling forests and green mountains.

“It’s pathetic what you all call mountains on this side of the country,” Maria said as she walked onto the jet. “Out in the Rockies, those little pimplies would be foothills.”

“You’re in a good mood,” Sam said.

Maria grinned. “Why wouldn’t I be?”
“She has agreed to our plan,” Vision said.

No one had to ask what plan it was. Steve hesitated, then smiled. “Good to have you with us,” he said.

Maria lifted her chin. “I apologize for any concern I gave you.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Clint said. When Steve looked over, the archer wasn’t smiling, but his entire face was full of happiness. “Suited up?”

“Of course,” Maria said.

Steve couldn’t help looking at Sharon, and found her already looking back. She gave him a half smile and said nothing.

Darcy, Helen, and Jane said a round of goodbyes while Thor brooded awkwardly near the cockpit. Steve nodded to them, thanked them when they wished him good luck, and turned right back to his argument with Tony and Sam over where exactly the Daavi front lines were in the forest.

Which was why he didn’t notice the blinking blue alert on the corner of the screen for several seconds.

“Tony,” Steve said, interrupting Tony’s long-winded sentence. “What’s that?”

Tony frowned at it. “Seems like Friday’s picking something up on the radar, but it can’t be anything significant, or the warning would be—” He broke off. “Thor, what are you doing?”

Thor jumped back from a screen near the front of the ship.

Instantly, the blue warning light turned red.

“Thor!” Steve roared. “Go!”

The pilot of the helicopter, a man Tony and Darcy seemed to trust from Stark Industries, revved the rotors. Darcy, Helen, and Jane were already aboard; Sam and Bucky, who were nearest, managed to slide inside as well as it lifted off.

Tony threw himself into the cockpit, hands flying over the controls.

Steve grabbed Thor and yanked him around. Loki was already there, hands locking Thor’s arms in a painful hold behind his back that negated Thor’s strength advantage.

“What did you do?” Steve snapped.

Thor wouldn’t meet his eyes. “What was necessary.”

“Tony,” Steve said urgently, whipping around.

“Steve!” Natasha shouted.

He spun again. She was flying backwards out of the bay door, tangled in a shining golden net.

Clint leaped after her without hesitation. Maria grabbed a rifle and started firing a hail of bullets at the gleaming single-person ship reeling Natasha, and Clint by default, up into its belly.

Sharon swung into the copilot’s seat. “Stark, give me a job.”
“Open fire on those bastards,” Tony snapped.

Steve grabbed a grenade launcher. “Anchor me!” he shouted to Wanda, and ran to the back of the jet.

Red light and power flared around his legs as he leaned, giving him purchase to swing perilously far over the forest below. The ships above them were designed in such a way that they could clearly lock together; a much larger version in the same teardrop shape hovered above them. Steve aimed. Fired. One of the small ships caromed sideways to avoid the grenade; another was thrown into a third by the force of the blast, and both of them screamed down out of sight.

Clint and Natasha vanished into the first ship’s belly.

A crash shook the jet. Steve fired another grenade and barely waited long enough to see transparent gold shields flicker into place around the ships before he turned to look. Thor had broken free of Loki’s grip and thrown him hard enough against the wall of the ship to leave a person-sized dent.

Loki snarled wordlessly in Thor’s direction. Thor spun his hammer.

The hum of an engine caught Steve’s attention. He swiveled his head.

A net flew straight for him.

There was a blue blur. The net dissolved into fragments and Pietro reappeared to Steve’s left.

Steve fired at the ship that had tried to take him. His grenade blew off the nose and it spiraled down out of sight.

Rockets whistled above him as Sharon or Tony fired on the main ship.

Vision flew out of the bay doors, cape flickering into view as he went, determined fury personified.

Steve pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

He caught a flicker of green near his hands and leaned down to look closer.

“No!” Tony shouted.

Wanda’s hold on Steve slipped.

He fell.

And jolted to a halt.

A golden net surrounded him. The world slowed as its threads wrapped around his arms and legs almost like they were alive. Steve kept fighting, but he felt like he was moving through molasses, like sleeping, like resting… It was a massive effort to keep his head.

And even though he made himself remember that he had to resist, why he had to resist, he could tell everything around him was moving more quickly than he was.

Loki, on the ground, with a metal gag over his mouth and his hands cuffed behind his back with gold gauntlets etched with runes. His green eyes burned as Tony fell to the ground beside him, then Sharon, both cuffed.
There was Wanda’s unconscious body.

A streak of blue—Pietro—racing for Thor.

The hammer flying.

Pietro hurled backwards out of the jet.

Wanda arched up off the floor in a silent scream.

Vision landed on the edge of the bay and Steve felt a flicker of hope, but then a man he didn’t recognize lifted Wanda against himself and held some kind of weapon to her side, speaking to Vision.

Steve blinked.

By the time his eyes opened again, Vision was kneeling, head masked in some kind of opaque glass, hands cuffed as well. His glowing eyes were fixed on Wanda’s body.

Then the net reeled Steve into a tiny, dark storage compartment, and the doors below him hissed shut.

“Hey!” he shouted, pounding on the nearest wall. His voice echoed strangely and his hands kept taking longer than he expected to make an impact, but he kept trying. “We’re allies! We need to fight Thanos—”

With no warning, the doors opened.

Steve rolled out onto a hard floor, somehow no longer encased in the net, and popped up to his feet.

Only to be faced with a large gun.

“Rogers, I believe,” said the armored woman in front of him. “Stand down.”

“Or what?” he said.

“Or I shoot,” she said bluntly. “This will be excrutiatingly painful. I’d rather not subject you to it unless I must.”

Part of Steve howled for him to attack her. Most of him, actually. But there were seven other armored people just in this room, and the ship was plenty big enough for more, not counting Thor. And a quick glance around the bare beige-walled room showed that the rest of the team was compromised. Even the people who’d made it to the helicopter. Even Loki, who Steve had begun to think was nearly untouchable.

He could recognize a lost battle when he saw it. Best to be pragmatic and wait for an opportunity. He’d be useless if he got hit by whatever she was holding.

Slowly, he raised his hands.

“Wise decision,” Thor said. “Turn around, please.”

Steve let Thor cuff his hands together behind his back. The cuffs weren’t the handcuffs Steve was used to; these were proper iron manacles, if only two inches wide, and he could feel runes scratched on their insides. The manacles were connected by a short chain.
The Avengers were propped up around the edges of the room while the Aesir waited in front of them, expressionless, while Thor and another man fussed over Loki.

Steve envisioned drop-kicking Thor into a black hole. It made him feel a little better, but not much.

“Lady Jane,” one of the warriors said, nodding to Jane.

She glared back. “Fandral. What’s going on here?”

Steve looked closer at the warrior. Tall, slim, red-haired, with a face that looked quick to smile and quick to frown. At the moment, he was frowning. “I must admit, these are not the circumstances under which I thought we would meet again,” he said.

“What, us handcuffed to a wall? Yeah, big step down from last time,” Darcy said, sprawling her legs out. She and Tony had somehow contrived to look comfortable even though they were prisoners. Steve was as tense as a live wire and couldn’t imagine sitting like that.

“Last time, we were battling the Destroyer to save a Midgardian town, that he was commanding,” another warrior, with dark hair and angled eyes, said, gesturing at Loki, “and here you are allied with him?”

Darcy smirked. “Everyone has their off days.”

The ship began to accelerate. Forward, and upward.

“No Bifrost?” Bruce said.

Thor rejoined them, leaving Loki thoroughly shackled and standing against the wall. His hair fell over his forehead. Steve couldn’t make himself meet Loki’s eyes for more than a second; the expression in them was as frightening as anything he’d ever seen. “Were the Bifrost to pluck an object of this mass from the surface of a planet, the shock wave could level miles of forest,” he said. “We must reach a safe distance so as to not impact your planet or your moon’s orbit in the slightest. It will not be long.”

“That’s comforting,” Sam said.

“Why are you doing this?” Steve demanded. He slid a glance to Natasha; she shook her head slightly. Cuffs weren’t easy to pick, then. “Thor. You know the danger we’re facing; why—”

“I will be returning to Midgard shortly to negotiate a settlement between the United Nations, as the closest thing to a centralized government in existence on your planet, and the invaders,” Thor said. “If Thanos is allowed to do as he originally intended, and place Fury in power to govern in his place, Odin believes his appetite for conquest will be sated.”

“Didn’t we already go over why that’s the dumbest fucking thing I’ve ever heard?” Clint snapped.

Loki whacked his wrist shackles together, getting their attention, and pointed at Clint meaningfully.

Thor crossed to him in three strides and slapped him across the face. “You are not helping your case, brother,” he growled. “I suggest you remain still.”

Steve wouldn’t have thought it possible, but the promise of burning cities in Loki’s eyes actually ratcheted up a notch.

“You’ll be guests,” the female warrior said. Now that Steve was thinking about it, he thought he
recognized her from footage of Puente Antiguo as well. She was beautiful the way statues are beautiful, and just as emotionless. “Not prisoners. But neither will you be allowed to return to Midgard.”

“For how long?” Bucky said. “Earth is our home.”

“And Asgard is Loki’s, but he seemed perfectly content to live with you mortals,” the dark-haired man countered.

“Hogun,” the woman said.

His lips thinned, but the warrior stepped back.

She turned her dark eyes back to the Avengers. “You will remain on Asgard for the foreseeable future. The Allfather has deemed your presence on Midgard a risk, because you will refuse to compromise and if you lose Midgard will be decimated.”

Steve opened his mouth.

“There’s no point arguing,” Maria said wearily. “Steve—they’re not going to change their minds.”

Fine. He made himself lean back against the wall. He’d bide his time. Wait for an opportunity. Hopefully Natasha could get the cuffs off before they were picked up by the Bifrost. Or Loki could figure out a way to get free.

“Don’t bother hoping for Loki to break you out,” the woman said. Steve realized he’d looked in Loki’s direction and cursed himself—he needed to get better about his tells. “Those shackles bind his magic as surely as they do his limbs. They’ve been crafted and spelled by master mages, including the Allmother herself.”

For a heartbeat, just a heartbeat, Loki’s face went perfectly, entirely blank. Empty.

The rage flickered back to life just as something jostled their ship ever so gently.

Thor frowned and looked at Hogun. “Are we expecting a companion ship?”

“No,” Hogun said grimly, readying an axe. “Sif?”

“Not to my knowledge,” the woman said. She didn’t reach for her weapon.

“I’ll check the control room,” Fandral said, and vanished up a ladder through a hatch in the ceiling.

Steve glanced around.

Natasha gave him a subtle nod. Bucky shifted his left shoulder. Almost, Clint mouthed.

Two, maybe three of them out of the cuffs, then. Steve felt around his cuffs. There didn’t seem to be a proper keyhole. He had no idea how Natasha and Bucky had managed to get out of theirs, but he didn’t think he could replicate the trick.

Vision could phase his body in and out of tangibility. Steve couldn’t see Vision well without being super obvious about it, but the Aesir were clearly concerned about something and not paying him much attention, so he leaned forward.

Vision was slumped in his bonds, trembling ever so slightly. Through the translucent mask they’d put him in, Steve could see his eyes were tightly closed and his face was contorted with pain. The
mind stone was flickering slightly. That had never happened before. On Vision’s other side, Wanda remained unconscious.

Whatever they’d done to Vision, he was clearly incapacitated. Steve glared at the Aesir and went back to going over his bonds for a way out.

“Cut us loose,” Clint said suddenly. “Thor, come on—if there’s a hostile, we’re fighters.”

“You’ll escape,” Thor said without looking at him.

“Okay, but we’d rather be your prisoners than someone else’s,” Sam said. “You at least aren’t going to torture us.”

Something exploded.

Steve was hurled against the wall. His head struck the metal and he groaned, blinking stars out of his eyes.

The ship’s artificial gravity was gone. He floated, weightless, against the wall. All the Aesir left in the room had gone flying as well and were trying to right themselves. Three of them had dropped their weapons. Idiots.

“Cut us loose!” Sharon insisted.

Sif looked at Thor.

“Sif, no, don’t—”

Hogun grabbed Thor and held him back. Sif kicked off the wall, straight for Sharon. Some kind of complex key glittered in her hand.

She didn’t make it before the ceiling peeled apart and a massive body dropped through.

Thanos.

Thor hurled himself at the Titan—and passed right through.

“Idiot,” Thanos said, looking at Thor with disgust. He snapped his fingers.

All the Aesir in the room froze.

Two more people floated down into the holding bay.

Natasha and Bucky launched themselves to their feet, cuffs falling away.

The newcomers—both women, one with green skin and one with blue—threw small black orbs at the floor. They hit, stuck, and crackled to life, caging Natasha and Bucky in a web of flickering wires.

Natasha threw herself at the wires and was hurled back with a cry. Bucky caught her and barely managed to keep from falling back against the force field himself.

The green-skinned woman surveyed the room. Once you got past the shock of her skin, she was pretty, but Steve barely noticed.

He’d kill both of them if they took his shackles off.
“This is better than I’d hoped,” Thanos said, smiling. He was perverse—craggy skin, oversized chin, eyes bright with malice and cunning and madness. “All the Avengers, trussed up like Yuletide gifts. That’s the holiday you celebrate, right?”

“Christmas,” Darcy said. “At least for us. It varies. We’ve got lots of cultures on Midgard.”

“All the Avengers, trussed up like Yuletide gifts. That’s the holiday you celebrate, right?”


The blue-skinned woman, whose body seemed made at least half of cybernetic implants and alterations, stepped up to Pietro with inhuman grace. She spun him roughly around and clamped a pair of black rods against his forearms. Instantly, the rods transformed into a spiderweb of wires that pinned his arms together and wrapped around his torso, effectively immobilizing him. She stripped the gold Aesir shackles aside and moved on.

Bruce looked at Steve, eyes panicked. Green rippled in his irises.

If he Hulked out, he’d save them. Probably. Thanos might be able to freeze the Hulk like he had Thor. But they were in a spaceship. Even Steve’s enhanced body couldn’t survive a vacuum, and with Loki out of commission and Wanda unconscious, it was a stupid move.

He shook his head.

“Tranquilize me,” Bruce said suddenly.

Nebula stared at him.

“Otherwise—I’ll wreck the spaceship,” he ground out, closing his eyes.

“Now.”

The green-skinned woman was at his side in seconds, cracking some kind of capsule beneath Bruce’s nose. He inhaled sharply, eyes opening wide.

The green faded from them, and he collapsed.

Steve glared at Nebula as she approached him. “I’ll kill you for this,” he whispered.

She yanked him toward her, then threw him to the floor, with more strength than she looked capable of. “You won’t get a chance,” she said.

Steve felt the black cuff system locking into place one section at a time. It was painful and completely immobilized him from shoulder to fingertip. There’d be no getting out of this.

They all got the same treatment. Even Vision and Wanda, who were insensate, and Bucky and Natasha, once Nebula zapped them into unconsciousness with some kind of laser weapon implanted in her right forearm. Steve pressed the location of the weapon into his memory for later.

They went to Loki last.

But instead of switching out the Aesir shackles for their own, the green-skinned woman fiddled with the metal gag until it fell to the floor with a clank.

Underneath, Loki’s lips were bleeding.

Steve realized where his scars had come from. This wasn’t the first time Loki had worn a muzzle.

“Did you take the scenic route?” he drawled.
“You’re lucky we made it before the Bifrost opened,” Nebula said, starting to unlock Loki’s shackles. “They’ll never open it now, not with us on board.”

If Steve was slow to process what this meant, it was only because he didn’t want to believe it.

But as the last of Loki’s chains fell away and he stepped forward, giving a mockery of a courtly bow to Thanos’ lieutenants, Steve could deny it no longer.

“Traitor!” Clint bellowed, lunging forward.

Loki gave him a withering look. “This is unbecoming, Clint. Control yourself.”

“No,” Pietro said, eyes wide.

Steve had never been this angry.

“Loki,” Natasha said, disbelieving. “What are you doing? He tortured you— he’s the one you want to kill—”

“I made him a deal he couldn’t refuse,” Thanos said, clearly enjoying their fury and shock. “Turns out, he wanted two things more than revenge on me: you all to stay alive, and revenge on Asgard.”

“Can they hear me?” Loki asked Thanos’ shade, gesturing toward the frozen Aesir.

Thanos nodded.

Loki walked up to Thor and leaned in close. “Return to Asgard,” he said, low and vicious. “Tell our father what happened here. Tell him I’m coming for his throne.”

He turned away.

“Loki,” Darcy said, and Steve had never heard her voice sound like that before. Darcy wasn’t the sort of person who begged.

Loki looked at Thanos. “Uphold your end of the bargain.”

“I care not if you keep your mortal whore,” Thanos said dismissively.

A furious, wordless sound ripped its way out of Bucky’s chest. Steve jerked against his restraints. They bit painfully into his skin.

Loki met Darcy’s eyes, entirely unapologetic. “You will remain alive, Darcy. And unharmed.”

“And the rest of us?” Tony snapped.

“Alive and mostly unharmed,” Loki said with a smirk. “I only have so much influence, Stark.”

Steve couldn’t hold back the words any longer. “I trusted you!”

Loki just raised an eyebrow. “That was your mistake, not mine.”

“Thor was right about you,” Steve growled.

Loki ignored him and looked at Nebula. “Are we stealing the Aesir ship, or using yours?”

“Ours,” Nebula said. Her voice was slightly hoarse and more than slightly metallic. “I’ll transport them. Go change out of that disgusting Midgardian clothing.”
“Gladly,” Loki said with a curl of his lip, and stalked out without a backward glance.

Nebula and the other woman started prodding the conscious Avengers into a line, linking the bonds around their arms and torsos to each other with slender chains that were disproportionately heavy when they tried to move.

Thanos’ shade flickered out of view, taking the beginning of a laugh with it, just as Steve laboriously kicked off the floor with the rest of his team, dragging the heavy chains with them as Nebula shoved them in the direction of her ship.
Unknown Location, Holding Cells of Thanos’ Hive-city

May 2012

There was no escaping these cells.

After hours of trying, even Natasha and Zima gave up. Bruce was conscious, but reported a splitting headache and that, somehow, the collar they’d put on him kept him from transforming into the Hulk. Wanda’s power was similarly bound and while Vision was conscious, the mind stone still flickered and he hadn’t responded when anyone tried to talk to him.

Natasha was going to lose it. She had only just gotten out of one cage that she’d only subjected herself to in the first place for Wanda’s sake, and now here she was in another that was proving impossible to breach. Her entire team was here. Except Loki, because he’d betrayed them.

“I’m going to kill him,” Steve said quietly.

Natasha stopped pacing. She didn’t disagree.

For the umpteenth time, she pressed herself close to the bars and scanned the cell block. There were twenty cells, of which five sat empty, along opposite sides of a wide aisle. The bars were pale gray and refused to so much as scratch no matter what they’d used—knives, their shackles, or fingernails. There were bars separating the cells as well as along the front walls of each—there was no privacy in here. Some kind of bulb was indented in the ceiling every ten or so feet and giving off harsh, bright, constant light. Time was illusory and slippery in here. Natasha felt less in control of herself with every passing minute.

“We need to talk about this,” Sharon said. “You’ve all known Loki a lot longer than I have, but—how could he do this?”

“I don’t know,” Clint said when no one else answered. “It doesn’t make sense.”

Natasha was on the opposite end of the cell block from him, and the opposite side, so she couldn’t see his face, but she knew him better than anyone except Zima. She heard the uncertain, questioning tone of his voice.

What did he see in this situation that she didn’t?

“He’s the God of Lies in Norse mythology,” Wanda spat. “Of course he couldn’t be trusted. You should’ve known this.”

“Don’t blame this all on us,” Tony snapped, standing up so he could see down the row of cells and into Wanda’s. “You’ve been training with him, working with him, and I haven’t heard a word of complaint from you.”

Wanda looked away.

“There’s something you should know,” Brice said quietly. “Loki’s a Frost Giant.”
Natasha frowned. Looked across the aisle at Zima. He shrugged slightly.

Jane and Darcy, though—they gasped.

“Explain,” Natasha said.

“Thor told me about other races in the Nine Realms,” Jane said. Natasha could practically see gears spinning to life in her head. “The Alvar, the Vanir, the Aesir, and—the Jotnar. Frost Giants. They invaded Earth once, a long time ago, and Asgard fought them off; that’s how Odin lost his eye. Asgard hates them. So does pretty much every other realm, actually, if Thor is to be believed, which… always seemed a little questionable to me, because prejudice but—We all knew Loki had a secret, and I guessed it had something to do with him not being fully Aesir, since he was hiding his DNA workup—”

“And you let him keep it a secret?” Sharon said incredulously.

Jane looked down. “We trusted him.”

Why? Natasha remembered learning about this from Tony and Bruce. Remembered the instant urge to spy on Loki, to find whatever he was hiding from them. Remembered talking herself out of it because he was her friend. Because she trusted him.

Just thinking about how foolish she’d been brought bile to her throat.

Unless.

Unless that niggling sense of something not adding up was the same little voice whispering to Clint.

Unless—was it possible Loki hadn’t really betrayed them?

They were alive, after all. Alive. Not on Asgard, not kidnapped and dragged to the other end of the universe by Thor and his friends because Odin was a fucking pansy with a crown.

“So, what, he just—keeps an illusion on all the time?” Sam said. “Didn’t your notes describe Frost Giants as blue?”

“He must,” Jane said. “It didn’t disappear when I hit him that day Wanda and Pietro found out… Maybe it’s a stronger spell?”

“How did you know about this?” Steve asked Bruce.

Good question. Natasha was only half-listening. Hadn’t their main problem been getting to Thanos without him noticing? That was the whole reason they’d stayed together and gone to where the Daavi numbers were highest; that meant more portals, and had resulted in an uncomfortably desperate plan to find a portal and go through it in reverse to get to Thanos.

But now they were here.

Natasha bit back her hope. It would only make things more painful if she was wrong. And she couldn’t voice this hypothesis, because what if they had mages spying on them right now?

She met Zima’s eyes across the aisle.

He saw the hope in her face and narrowed his eyes, thinking.

He’d figure it out.
“He talked to me about it,” Bruce was saying. “In the safe house, before we went to the UN to negotiate. He showed me.”

“Why?” Wanda asked suspiciously.

Natasha couldn’t see Bruce at all; he was on the opposite side of Clint from her, in the last occupied cell on that side of the aisle. So she couldn’t read his face or posture as he said, “Because Loki’s not the only one struggling with a side of himself that other people see as a monster.”

Tony opened his mouth.

Natasha glared at him. Tony wasn’t good at the whole ‘emotional comfort’ aspect of friendship.

He closed it again.

Granted, Natasha herself wasn’t any better, but she knew now to not make a tough moment for Bruce even worse.

“He really seemed to—to like us,” Helen said. “Trust, even. I know I’m fairly new to this group but… it seemed genuine.”

“He was acting,” Steve said angrily. “That’s who he is. An actor. A liar.”

Maria let her head fall back against the bars. “We never should’ve trusted him.”

*Unless he pretended to agree to Thanos’ deal so he could get us all into the belly of Thanos’ space city,* Natasha thought, excitement bubbling in her stomach. She kept her face perfectly blank but when she looked at Zima she saw the realization dawning in his eyes, and smiled just a little bit, for only him to see. *Unless he kept it from us so our reactions would seem genuine.*

In that case, they’d need to find a way out of these cells.

But she’d spent hours trying, *Hours.* So had everyone else. Without tools or jailors to manipulate, there was nothing Natasha could do.

“Darcy?” Tony said. “You’ve been weirdly quiet.”

“Now might be a good time to come clean on what exactly is going on between you and Loki,” Steve added.

Darcy was only three cells down from Natasha, so Natasha had a clear view of Darcy slumped at the back of her cell. Facing the wall, hiding her movements from everyone except Jane, Helen, and Natasha. Her eyes were closed, and she seemed to be whispering.

“Darcy,” Bruce prodded.

Darcy didn’t move. “It’s not your business.”

“It is my business when he betrayed us and dumped us in cells while Thanos conquers Earth!” Steve snapped.

Darcy ignored him.

Darcy. She was a mage. A weak one, by Loki’s standards, but it was more magic than anyone else in this room had.
Natasha exchanged another glance with Zima. It went unnoticed since everyone was homed in on Darcy.

Sharon tried next, her voice gentle. “Darcy… Whatever was between you, I know you’re upset, but we need to know if there’s anything we can use against him.”

Tony was on the opposite side of the block from Natasha, and only one cell down. She saw the moment he understood what was happening and came to the same conclusion she had. His head snapped up and he opened his mouth.

Natasha glared at him again, putting all her fury and desperation at being caged again into the look.

Tony actually flinched back.

She glanced subtly at Zima.

Tony followed her gaze.

Zima raised a finger to his lips. She looked back at Darcy. Zima would be watched less than Natasha; she couldn’t have Steve noticing her gesture and demanding to know what it was for.

Darcy stayed silent.

Steve sighed and turned away. Following his cue, Wanda, Sharon, Sam, and Maria relaxed their scrutiny of her too.

“I’ll help you kill him, Steve,” Wanda said quietly. Of all of them, only she and Vision had been left in their restraints. Vision was still out of it, but Wanda could still stand up and move around; only her hands, arms, and power remained bound. “For trapping us again. He knew what it did to me and he put us back in a cage.”

Darcy popped to her feet with a suddenness that caught everyone except Natasha and Zima by surprise. She marched to the front of her cage, laid her hands on the bars, and spoke a few words.

Blueish light flared.

All the locks shattered at once with furious cracks, and the cell doors swung violently open.

“The hell?” Sam said.

“Hang on,” Darcy said, going straight to Vision’s cell. “I’m worried about him.”

Natasha burst through her own doorway, met Zima in the center of the aisle, and grabbed his hand.

“What did they do to him?” Tony said quietly. Natasha joined him and Steve and Wanda at the entrance to Vision’s cell.

Darcy reached out a hand, touched the shell around Vision’s head with a finger, and yanked her hand back with a hiss. “It’s like… disrupting brain waves. Or some shit. Wanda, want to help me out?”

“Can you get this off?” Wanda said, turning to offer her bound hands to Darcy.

Darcy traced runes over the shackles and started voicing a spell. Grudgingly, the black bindings folded back into themselves until two rods dropped to the floor and Wanda’s hands were free.
“He might freak out when I get it off,” Darcy said. “Just… yeah. Okay. Here goes.”

She muttered a few words, frowning with concentration. A bead of sweat dripped down her temple.

There was a cracking sound. Vision blinked. The mind stone’s glow stabilized.

The shell shattered.

Vision jackknifed to his feet with shocking speed, hovering an inch off the ground as a blast of gold power shot from the mind stone. It ricocheted off a red shield summoned by Wanda and hit the wall, leaving a scorch mark and a three-foot-deep hole into solid steel.

“Vision! Calm down, it’s us,” Tony shouted.

Vision blinked several more times as the bolt of power faded. Natasha slowly relaxed as recognition dawned in his eyes. “Tony… Wanda.” He looked down, took in the shattered binding and Darcy slumped against the wall of his cell. “Darcy, are you injured?”

“Nope,” Darcy said, wincing and using the bars to pull herself to her feet. “Nope, I’m all good, I break alien mind control fishbowls every day before breakfast. Can we get a move on?”

Natasha stepped back, waving Tony away as well, so Vision and Darcy could leave the cell.

“We can talk freely,” Darcy said, eyes on fire. “I just heard from Loki. No mages are watching us—Thanos totally lost interest.”

“I knew it,” Clint said. He clapped Pietro on the shoulder, grinning maniacally. Wanda joined them, standing close to her brother and staring warily at Darcy. “I knew something didn’t add up here. He was just trying to get us here without Thanos knowing, wasn’t he?”

“Yup,” Darcy said, returning Clint’s grin with fire in her eyes. “Thanos has been trying to turn him since he went and spied and got the intel on the weapon and shit. Thanos did the mind-traveling thing last night and offered Loki a bargain: us in exchange for helping Loki take down Asgard. He warned Loki about Thor and the others coming to kidnap us and said if Loki gave Thanos our location with a magic flare, and helped take Midgard, then Thanos would help Loki take Asgard later. Loki woke me up and basically wrote a shit ton of rune spells on me so no one would look too closely because I’m just a weak little mortal girl and now I’m going to bust us out of here so we can kick Thanos’ ass.”

“I like this plan,” Pietro said.

“You were keeping us from ending up prisoners on Asgard,” Tony said. “And finding us a better way in than hoping we could sneak back through one of the existing portals.” He shook his head.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Steve said. Natasha examined him closely and was relieved to find he wasn’t angry. More shocked than anything else.

“Your reactions had to be genuine. Thanos has some limited ability to touch minds with seidr and even though some of you are fantastic actors, just knowing the truth would’ve sent us up shit creek if he noticed the truth in your head. Loki and I could shield ourselves with seidr. Well. Technically, Loki shielded both of us, since I’m not strong or skilled enough to pull that off.”

“Whose idea was this?” Sharon said.

Darcy shrugged. “Kind of Loki’s, kind of mine.”
“It’s brilliant.”

“Yes,” Darcy said. “I know. Any more questions?”

“Where’s Loki now?” Bruce said.

“With Thanos,” Darcy said, eyes unfocused. “Overseeing the invasion. He thinks the green-skinned woman—Gamora—is up to something. Nebula’s a creepy little shit. Loki can’t see her mind at all because of the cybernetics. He hates it. They’re Thanos’ adopted daughters and most trusted pawns. No sign of the weapon yet but there definitely is one.”

“Very clever,” Tony said.

“He figured it out,” Zima said. “Natasha had to glare at him to keep his mouth shut.”

“I saw that,” Darcy said, grinning at them. “Thanks. I wasn’t sure if we had mages watching us, but Loki said he checked and we’re all free of magic spying. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover though, this is basically a city shaped like a blob of jelly floating around in space.”

“Weapons?” Steve asked.

They’d done an inventory earlier, and while they’d been left with their suits and tact gear, almost all the weapons were Natasha flexed her wrists, feeling for the hidden knives of her suit. Nebula hadn’t been clever enough to find all her concealed weapons, but the blades she had left were small and few in number.

“We don’t know what they did with the weapons they took off us,” Darcy said. “Hopefully we can find some or all of it along the way. It’s lucky the Aesir didn’t even bother disarming us.”

“Guess we’re shooting with whatever we can steal,” Sam said.

“You’ll be empty handed for a while then,” Zima said.

“Nah, I’ll just steal guns from you,” Sam fired back.

Steve frowned. “Tony, Jane—if you get materials, can you build another seidr-canceling gun?”

Tony looked at Jane. “Yes.”

Jane nodded.

“I’ll go along,” Helen said. “To help.”

“I can guide the rest of us to Thanos,” Darcy said. “Using Loki’s directions.”

Natasha looked at Zima with a raised eyebrow.

He cocked his head, considering, and nodded.

“We’ll strike off on our own,” Zima said. “See if we can’t find some of Thanos’ lieutenants to kill.”

Steve started to respond but hesitated.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Sam said.

Tony shrugged. “We keep hearing the Daavi are a large and unbelievably ugly disaster without
leaders.”

“They’re some of our best fighters,” Maria countered.

“This is what we’re trained for,” Natasha said. “More than anything else, more than any of you.”

Steve nodded. “Do it.”

“Where will I be least useless?” Darcy said.

Bruce frowned at her. “You’re the last thing from useless—”

“I mean obviously,” Darcy said impatiently. “But I’ve got like four months of irregular sessions with you guys as my only exposure to fighting, so this situation isn’t my forte. Planning, yes. Blackmailing, absolutely. But I don’t want to get in anyone’s way, and I don’t want to stay here in case someone comes along and grabs me and tries to use me as leverage against you.” She paused. “If that happens, let me die, it’s not exactly a hard choice between me and everyone else on the planet.”

“We need you to guide us anyway,” Steve said.

“You can hide,” Sam said. “Or find a corner and fire at Thanos if we get you a gun, your aim’s decent.”

“Just please don’t hit any of us,” Wanda said. “I need to focus on shielding against our enemies, not my teammates.”

“Ha ha,” Darcy said. “We good? Everyone got your big kid pants on?”

“You say the strangest things,” Zima muttered as they headed for the door to the cell block.

Darcy smiled sweetly at him over her shoulder. “Why, thank you.”

Pietro tried the door. It swung open. “That was easy,” he said. “I’ll scout.”

He blurred out of sight.

Natasha and Zima nodded goodbye and took off after him at a fast, light-footed jog.

The hive-city was beautiful. It had a strange smell, and the passageways twisted back in on themselves in a way that made it clear it had never been designed with human thought processes in mind, and there were ramps in place of stairs, and the windows and doors were oddly proportioned, but it was still beautiful.

After slinking through its belly for an hour, Natasha was starting to get an intuitive sense of its layout. The artificial gravity pulled toward the edges of the hive-city, not the center; they’d already found one room that had a floor made entirely of glass, resulting in an extremely disorienting view of space beneath their feet. Some of the sections were spaceships that seemed to have just been absorbed into the city. The shapes and sizes and color schemes and furniture of these spaceships varied enough that Natasha suspected a lot of them had simply been pillaged from around the universe and added on like a patchwork quilt made of fabric scraps, except large, deadly, and full of murderous alien parasites. There also, oddly, appeared to be random asteroids attached to the hive city—for stability or weight or structure or just because Thanos was insane, she couldn’t decide.
Every now and then, one of the tubular passages, most of which were made of a mostly opaque milky-white material, would turn a corner and dump them right on top of an asteroid that was partially or in some cases completely blocking the way forward.

“I could never live here,” Zima murmured as they traversed yet another clear glassy arch between two spaceships, surrounded by the void of space below them and the twisted intestines of the hive-city above. “I’d go insane.”

“There’s a house San José, California, called the Winchester Mystery House,” Natasha said, pausing to scan the passages above. When inhabitants of Thanos’ city moved in them, you could see shadows from outside. There was very little movement, and none close to them. “The woman who built it—her husband and son owned the Winchester rifle company, a long time ago, and apparently after they died, she was plagued by the ghosts of people who were killed by the weapons her family made. She went to a psychic and the psychic told her she had to start building a house for the ghosts to live in and never stop. The Winchester house is massive and sprawling and full of doors that go nowhere, stairs that dead-end in the ceiling, fake doors, empty rooms, and secret passages.”

They kept walking.

Zima shot her a dry look. “I’m assuming you’ve visited.”

Natasha grinned. They came to the end of the arch and ducked into the next spaceship. This one was mostly red and orange on the inside, with seats that seemed too low and wide and oddly placed. “I made Clint come with me, three or four years ago. He hated the idea but once we got there, we spent an entire night exploring. This place reminds me of it.” She glanced back at the arch and the creepy hive-city visible beyond. “Designed and built by a nut job.”

“It’s like seeing the manifestation of his crazy,” Zima said. “A road map of what’s in his head.”

“Minus the torture chambers.”

“I’m sure those are around here somewhere,” Zima said. He paused. “Heads up.”

They split, pressing themselves flat to the walls on either side of the doorway ahead.

Voices drifted through a second later, speaking a language Natasha didn’t know.

A group of four aliens walked through. Not Daavi, but some other race that they’d seen already and looked like a cross between a pterodactyl and a chainsaw. They kept on going, not even noticing the intruders.

Natasha peeled herself off the wall and drifted after them. Zima would follow in a second, once she started the killing—she moved more quietly, and these aliens had excellent hearing.

The one in the back turned just as she drove a knife into its jugular. It gurgled and lashed out with its leathery wings. She dodged behind the motion, remaining unnoticed for a second while the others flailed and squawked in confusion.

Then Zima was there, swinging a swordlike bladed weapon he’d taken off a dead alien with loose rubbery skin and too many limbs, slashing through the pterodactyl creatures’ wings. Natasha shot out from behind her first target as he slumped to the floor and tore through a second from behind as Zima slashed down its chest from the front.

They died in the span of seconds.
Zima and Natasha crouched among the corpses, listening.

No alarms. No shouts. They’d passed unnoticed, again.

“This place is deserted,” Zima commented as they sifted through the corpses for weapons.

Natasha slung a fat-barreled bulbous gun over her back. “It seems to be mostly for the Daavi, and they’re all attacking Earth.”

“True,” Zima said.

“This was, what, forty-three?” Natasha nudged one of the corpses with her toe.

“Forty-four, I think,” Zima said. “There was that smoky thing on the upper levels.”

“We can’t be sure we killed it.”

“I’m going to count it anyway.”

She rolled her eyes. “Is it a competition?”

“Yes,” Zima said. “I’m going to go back to the others and tell them I killed an even fifty aliens while they were skulking around.”

“We’re skulking, too,” Natasha said as they crept forward through the spaceship.

“Productively skulking.”

She gave up, grinning. “I think we’re nearing Thanos,” she said instead.

“Increase in aliens we’ve seen?”

“Exactly.”

Zima glanced around. This spaceship was small; they’d already passed through it. “I agree. I think we’ve more or less cross the city; our cells were near the edge… back that way.”

“I thought it was farther to our right,” Natasha said.

They swapped glances.

“But yes,” she said. “More or less.”

Voices again.

There was nowhere to hide in the passage. Nowhere to run except back to the spaceship. And Natasha might have stayed to fight, but she recognized one of the voices as the distinctly metallic sound Nebula made when she talked, so she grabbed Zima’s arm and dragged him silently back the way they’d come.

They ducked into a side room as soon as they hit the spaceship. Not a moment too soon—peeking around the doorless threshold, Natasha saw both Nebula and Gamora striding by, speaking in English.

“… how they escaped?” Nebula said.

“None. Father is watching the Jotun closely, but the seidr in the cells wasn’t his. Evidently one of the
mortals has some bit of power, and kept it a secret.”

Natasha crept out of her hiding place and shadowed them, listening closely.

“I can’t believe we have to go track them down,” Nebula complained.

Gamora shrugged. “I suppose we’re the only people trusted enough to do it.”

“Two of us, against all fifteen of them?” Nebula shook her head. “It’s foolish.”

“We know the terrain and can use it against them,” Gamora said.

“It’s still foolish.” Nebula paused. “Sister, could we not use the Chappen? There is still a squadron left in the bowels of the city.”

“No,” Gamora said. “Those are reserve forces.”

“Yes,” Nebula said. “And we have fifteen of our most dangerous enemies loose inside our city. I think it’s a perfectly reasonable time to use reserve forces.”

“No,” Gamora repeated.

Nebula stopped walking. Natasha ducked down behind a control panel and spied on them around its edge. “Fine,” Nebula said. “I’ll simply call Father and ask him.”

Gamora paused and stared at Nebula with narrowed eyes.

There was something wrong here.

It was Gamora that Loki thought was, in Darcy’s words, up to something.

Nebula raised her wrist toward her lips.

Gamora lunged forward, yanking her arm down and breaking her elbow with a crack.

“Idiot,” Nebula said. Her arm snapped back into place in a way that was so perverse and counterintuitive Natasha almost flinched. “Father doesn’t know about this crusade of ours, does he? You’ve led me off on a fool’s errand. Why? To make me look bad before him?” She laughed bitterly. “It won’t work. I thought you smarter than this. You’re stuck with me here as well.”

“No, Nebula,” Gamora said, impossibly softly. “I brought you here so we could speak in private.”

Nebula looked around; Natasha ducked out of sight. “Yes, the Kree ship. Father still hasn’t learned how to make listening devices work here. I should’ve known. Say what you came here to say, Gamora.”

“You know as well as I that this isn’t right.”

Natasha had to swallow a gasp.

There was a pause. “Are you referring to the invasion of Midgard?”

“Yes.”

“Watch what you say,” Nebula warned, and edge to her voice. “This is treason, and he is our father.”

“That does not make him automatically in the right,” Gamora said. “Please. Nebula. You are my
sister and I would have you by my side if—”

“If what? If you commit suicide?” Nebula scoffed. “This is your last chance, Gamora. I offer it to you because of our shared childhood. Recant what you’ve said. I don’t want to know what you’re planning, and I don’t want to know. Take it back and I’ll forget this ever happened.”

“No,” Gamora said. Natasha didn’t know the green-skinned woman, but she thought there was sadness in her voice just before the clang of metal on metal resounded through the ship.

Gamora had some kind of bladed staff. She’d blocked a blow from Nebula and they now circled one another warily.

“I do not wish to fight you, sister,” Gamora said, lowering her staff slightly.

_No, you idiot, keep it up!_ Natasha thought.

Nebula scoffed. “We’ve fought each other daily under our father’s supervision for years. How is this different?”

“You’ll have to kill me to make me forsake this path,” Gamora said.

“Then I will.”

“I’m your sister, you won’t—”

Gamora was fast, but she’d dropped her guard slightly. Nebula lashed out, got inside the staff, and knocked Gamora to the ground with a blade at her throat.

Gamora froze.

“One last chance to take it back,” Nebula said.

Gamora spit on her.

Natasha lunged out of her hiding place, raised the bulbous gun she’d stolen, and fired just as Nebula brought the knife down.

The blast hurled Nebula thirty feet down the corridor and into the wall of the passage on the far side hard enough to crack.

A siren wailed, and a bulkhead wall slammed down between the passage and the ship, cutting them off from Nebula.

Zima hurtled around the corner and came to a halt just behind Natasha. He’d have no idea what was happening but he was there, vibrating with tension and ready to back whatever play she made.

Gamora rolled over and picked herself up, every movement slow and wary. Her expression was caught somewhere between shocked and perplexed.

“Thing packs quite a punch,” Natasha said conversationally, hefting the gun.

Gamora paused. “It is Kree technology,” she said.

“Well, it’s my technology now,” Natasha said. “I’m Natasha Romanoff, by the way. This is James Barnes.”
Gamora stared at them, still clearly not sure how to respond to a Midgardian saving her life. “Gamora.”

“We heard,” Zima said.

“How?”

“Your sister called you that,” Natasha said, not wanting Gamora to learn just yet that Darcy and Loki were in communication.

“I expected you all to stay together once you’d escaped,” Gamora said.

Natasha shrugged. “Guess we’re not as predictable as you thought.”

“Evidently not. The rest of your team has gone after Thanos?”

“Yes,” Natasha said, deciding not to mention Tony, Jane, and Helen’s separate mission. That could be their ace in the hole.

“And you are… assassins?”

Zima shrugged one shoulder. “More or less.”

“More, I presume,” Gamora said, looking pointedly to the right. “I smell fresh blood.”

“We ran into a group of those bat things with claws on their faces,” Natasha said.

“Chappen?” Gamora looked startled. “How many?”

“Four.”

“You took down four Chappen by yourselves?”

Zima shifted. “It wasn’t difficult.”

Gamora cocked her head. “Perhaps you’re not so hopelessly outmatched as I feared. Come with me.”

“Where?” Natasha said, keeping the gun ready.

Gamora picked her staff up from the floor, collapsed it back into itself, and attached it to a harness reaching across her back. “If you come with me, I can help you.”

Natasha glanced at Zima, her eyes saying something to the effect of Do we trust her?

He shrugged again. Might as well.

Keep an eye on her.

Natasha and Zima followed Gamora back out of the Kree ship.

Chapter End Notes
So you know that Tumblr post that cycles around in screenshots and stuff about writers coming up with horrible cliffhangers and killing beloved characters cackling and having a cup of tea with Satan afterward? Yeah, that was me after posting that last chapter, and then reading your comments. Sorry I prolonged the agony by taking long to get this one up. (I'm not actually sorry but I have a legitimate excuse; out of town family visiting and me being the only teenager I get roped into watching the kids. I don't like kids. I've been complimented by four family members on how well I deal with them. They don't know I've imagined punting their toy box off a cliff like five times already in my head.)

You can emerge from the pillow fort of denial now, guys. No one's even dead yet. Shockingly. Get ready for drama, fighting, and morally questionable decisions next chapter. Well, this fic in general, really.

I'm not responding to the pillow fort of denial comments individually because there is a whole fucking lot of them, but everyone involved in that comment thread made me laugh and 100% admire your methods for coping with emotionally scarring fanfiction. Maybe not best for real life but then again I'm the person who procrastinated a biology project writing this stupid thing and then had to pull 3 all nighters in a row last year, so I really can't judge. :D
Unknown Location, Thanos’ Hive-city

May 2012

Jane’s eyes got very wide as soon as they saw the lab.

Tony wanted to laugh at her, but he couldn’t, probably because this was not their lab in his Tower but a large one with awkwardly low ceilings and strange technology made out of oily blue metal and built by aliens who wanted him dead. He was distracted.

And that was before he realized this was built right above the center of the hive-city’s network hub.

“Those look like servers,” Helen said doubtfully, looking down through the floor, which was made of possibly glass, at the racks of grayish sleek boxes below them.

“They are servers,” Tony said, already making a beeline for the center of the room. “Or an equivalent. This isn’t a human network but any system has to have an interface for people to input commands, and a way of displaying outputs. Vision, stay here, I need your help.”

“I thought we were building another of the seídr weapons,” Steve said from the door.

“We are,” Tony said. Vision phased through the wall so he wouldn’t have to push his way to the doorway and walked over to Tony. Jane was already sifting through things with metallic clacking sounds. “But I’m also going to try and get an interface with Thanos’ security system going, because if I do that I can wreck this place from the inside. I can already tell it’s held together with eighty percent technology and twenty percent spite.”

Wanda elbowed Steve aside and swept her eyes around the lab.

“Hey,” Tony said. “Uh—Sharon, or whoever has one—I need a knife, preferably not one that’s been used on an alien in the last few hours.”

“Here.” Sharon pulled a small pocketknife from her boot and tossed it to him. Tony caught the thing and set it aside while he poked around what looked like a keyboard, except larger, awkwardly angled, and covered in spikes instead of keys.

“Tony.”

He looked up. “What?”

“I asked why you need a knife,” Steve said.

Tony shrugged and went back to his examination of the keyboard.

He was on the ground, on his back, with his head jammed into a tiny dusty space beneath the table, when Bruce asked, “Why’s this place unguarded?”

“Likely Thanos sent everyone to Earth,” Maria said. “Same reason the whole rest of the city’s empty.”
“First lucky break,” Clint said.

“You mean aside from Darcy and Loki having a brilliant contingency plan?” Sharon said.

“Stop it, this will go straight to my head,” Darcy said, batting her eyelashes outrageously.

Tony ignored them all, climbing out from under the table. He could make this work.

“Tony,” Sam said. “I kind of hate to say it, but you don’t have your suit. Or any of your normal tech. How—”

Tony grabbed the pocketknife and looked Sam dead in the eyes. “Dramatically,” he said, and cut his left forearm open.

Steve flinched forward. Vision made a grab for the knife, but Tony pulled back and glared at him through the pain. “Back off, I’m not committing suicide,” he said irritably, and very carefully ignored their staring and confusion while he levered a small pellet up and out of his arm. It was black and looked like someone had taken a sphere with the diameter of a quarter and stretched it from opposite ends until it made a long elliptical shape.

Tony cleaned blood of the pellet with his shirt, ignoring the drips—well, more than drips—that ran down his arm, coated his fingers, and spattered to the floor. Time for that later. He dropped the pellet on the table. “Tony Stark, protocol alpha nine one one, activate.”

The pellet clacked and expanded into a slightly undersized but clearly cutting-edge version of a StarkPad.

“The suit’s not what makes me Iron Man,” he told Sam with a grin, briskly tying a strip of torn undershirt around his arm. “You might want to get moving, this isn’t a spectator sport.”

“So most desperate science doesn’t involve you cutting weird ass technopellets out of your body?” Sam said. “Because I could watch that shit all day.”

“There’s something wrong with you, Wilson,” Tony said, already holding up the mini StarkPad and scanning what he was ninety nine percent sure was a person-network interface.

“Like you’re one to talk,” Sam muttered as the group shifted, aiming back for the hallway.

“Very different problems,” Tony said.

They vanished from the doorway. Helen slammed the door and locked it from inside.

“Let’s get to work,” Jane said with a manic grin.

Chapter End Notes

Family time still going, so I haven’t had time to write lately, hence the short chapter and less frequent updates. Sorry guys-they’re all leaving in 2 days so hopefully this won’t go on for too long. I’m exhausted. Too much people time and not enough introvert recharge time. *sigh* Anyway. Enjoy some Tony being dramatic, again. :D
Unknown Location, Thanos’ Hive-city

May 2012

Wanda always used to laugh when people said they could taste their fear. Fear was a biological reaction to your imagination coming up with a future that may or may not ever come to pass. It was an illusion. It was a red flag saying something is wrong. It was a warning reflex evolved over millions of years in which humans were only about halfway up the food chain to keep primitive precursors to Homo sapiens alive.

It wasn’t anything you could taste.

But huddled in a cramped hallway with a ceiling that supposedly formed one of the walls of the hive-city’s center, disoriented by the slight upward curve of the passages since gravity pulled towards the edges of the city and Thanos was at its heart, Wanda realized she’d been wrong. She could taste her own terror on her tongue. It was iron and blood and cold; it was dread and sour breath and the dry rasp of stale air in and out of her lungs. It was the time eight-year-old Pietro drank curdled milk on a dare and she had the foul hint of it lingering in her mouth for hours. It was like nothing she’d ever experienced.

Darcy had led them to this hallway and they were waiting now. Steve and Maria and Bruce and Sam talked quietly a little farther up. Darcy was sitting against the wall beside her, eyes closed and head tipped back, in a very similar position to Wanda. Pietro—Wanda could feel him if she concentrated, through their bond formed as they grew together in their mother’s belly and strengthened by the mind stone; he ran near but not too near, keeping an eye out for anyone coming near. He’d be back soon.

“Hey,” Clint said, crouching in front of her.

Wanda blinked at him. It was difficult to focus. Her mind, not her eyes. She’d found that something about this place made reaching outside herself immensely uncomfortable. She suspected it had to do with seidr wards, but since she wasn’t a proper mage, she wasn’t sure, and she didn’t want to ask Darcy, since Darcy seemed to be wound tight as a spool of copper wire. The effort of keeping her power entirely under lock and key was taking a lot more out of her than she’d expected. She hadn’t realized how much she relied on the constant stream of perceptions it fed her, how much she’d come to use it every second, until it was gone.

“Wanda?”

“Sorry,” she said, giving her head a quick, hard shake. “Sorry. I’m—it’s… hard for me in here.”

Clint didn’t question it. He just flipped around so he was sitting against the wall in the same manner as her, except he stretched his legs out in front instead of keeping his knees balled up to his chest. “Nah, I get it, this is some nasty shit. You doing okay?”

“Define okay.”

He huffed out a short laugh. “Fair enough.”
Wanda looked down the hall. Steve didn’t smile much, but he was as close as he usually came, which involved a certain lightness to his expression. She was surprised how much less obvious it was when she didn’t have her powers subtly telling her the general state of his mind. Even Maria had smile lines at the corners of her eyes, and Sam was chuckling lightly, and Bruce was smiling around his worry. “I don’t know how they do it,” she found herself saying. “Smile. Laugh. I don’t think I can.”

“It’s not easy,” Clint said. “Sometimes… well, I think for them it’s a coping mechanism. Eventually you get to a point where you go, hey, there’s a really good chance of me dying within the next hour or day or week or whatever, so I might as well enjoy myself when I can.”

“Worrying’s useless,” Darcy added from Wanda’s other side. Her voice was flat in a way Wanda had never heard it before. “Either you can do something about the problem, in which case you’d better be doing the thing instead of sitting around fussing and knitting booties, or you can do fuck all about the problem, and worrying’s not going to help.” She laughed hollowly. “I keep telling myself that. It normally works. But I’m sitting over here worrying my ass off and hiding it because if Loki feels how close I am to panicking I’m not sure he’ll stay put.”

It gave Wanda immeasurable relief to hear she wasn’t the only person scared out of her mind. “Aren’t you worried for yourself?” she asked.

Darcy’s response was slow to come. “Myself I can control.”

Clint heaved a sigh. “You two are sure Tweedle Doom and Tweedle Gloom today. Someone pour mopey juice in your coffee this morning?”

“I think it’s the general death-trap-alien-hive-city-in-space ambiance,” Darcy retorted. “Think we should hire Thanos an interior decorator?”

“I don’t think he’ll need one,” Clint said. “Going by the look on Tony’s face when he started hacking into this thing. If there’s a city left to decorate, I’ll be surprised.”

Wanda thought about it. “You’re right. It helps to be amused.”

Darcy closed her eyes again.

“What’s going on with you two?” Wanda said carefully.

Darcy cracked just one eye and peered at Wanda without moving her head. The general effect was more dismissive than Wanda could’ve imagined. “Why do you care?”

“We’re your friends,” Clint said. “I wasn’t going to ask because I like my head firmly attached to my shoulders and also staying shaped like a human in general, but since she did…” He trailed off with a suggestive hand gesture.

“Clint Barton, drama queen,” Darcy said. “Should your new callsign be Gossip Girl?”

He feigned offense. “Uncalled for.”

“Oh, that was called for, just in subtext, and even if it wasn’t I’d have said it, because I’m kind of an asshole like that,” Darcy said. “Especially when I’m defensive. Which I am right now, because you’re prying about my personal life.”

Wanda frowned at her. She didn’t want to say it, because Darcy scared her just slightly and Loki scared her more than slightly even though she trusted both of them to watch her back, but this was
unnecessarily harsh.

Darcy caught her expression, and heaved a sigh. “Shit, okay, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you. Either of you.”

“Did you just apologize?” Clint said.

Darcy glowered at him. Wanda was fairly sure it was a farce. “Now I want to take it back.”

“No take backs,” Clint said instantly.

“If you don’t want to answer the question, just say so,” Wanda said.

Darcy bit her lip.

Wanda had given up waiting for a response when Darcy muttered “Fuck it” and turned her head to face them. Clint, on Wanda’s over side, leaned forward to see better.

“We’re like… friends with benefits,” Darcy said. “Really good friends bordering on people who are dating.”

“You haven’t… talked about this?” Clint said. “Decided what to call it? Also, what kinds of benefits are we talking here?”

“Yeah, we’ve talked about it and decided to take things one day at a time until we’ve both survived this mess and then we can sort shit out. We were sick of dancing around each other all the time but there’s still the pesky fact that he’s a) roughly forty times my age and b) immortal.” She grinned. “As for the benefits, they are very beneficial benefits. On both sides. You’re smart people, you can sort out the rest on your own.”

Wanda had suspected for a while—it wasn’t easy to hide things from her, and the way Loki and Darcy acted in each other’s presence wasn’t particularly subtle—but they were also spectacularly guarded people and it was hard to be sure about anything regarding either of them, much less the two of them together.

“You and Loki dating…” Clint mused. “That’s a slightly terrifying prospect.”

“You’ve all survived it so far.”

Clint gestured wildly, managing to encompass the entire crazy situation they’d found themselves in. “Barely!”

“Shut up, we saved your asses,” Darcy said amiably.

“I saw right through it,” Clint said, grinning smugly.

Wanda winced. “I didn’t. I was ready to hold him down while Steve killed him.”

“We know,” Darcy said drily. “I—hang on.” Her expression changed subtly. “Loki needs to talk to me, I gotta go.”

She stood up and walked away.

Wanda worried at a scab of unknown origin on her left wrist.

“It’s okay to be afraid,” Clint said quietly. “I know you know we need all hands on deck here. But if
you’re not ready to walk in there with metaphorical guns blazing, then I’m gonna tell you to bust us a hole in the wall and then wait out here, because my job right now is to kill Thanos before he can destroy Earth, and I can’t do my job and babysit at the same time.”

She didn’t answer.

Clint heaved a sigh. “This is insane. I’m over here fighting an alien Titan thing with a gun I stole off the corpse of a different alien, in a city in space that reminds me way too much of the Death Star for comfort.”

Wanda cracked a slight smile. “Just when you thought you’d hit peak weird…”

“Every time I tell myself, nothing can surprise me anymore, something surprises me,” Clint said. He looked her in the eyes. “Okay, but seriously, are you going to be able to walk in there?”

Wanda thought about Sokovia, then—the city where she’d grown up, now half covered in rubble from Hydra’s fight with the Avengers. She thought of the other young people Hydra conscripted and convinced to join them, the others who’d died under experimentation. She remembered touching Loki’s mind, and the vast, unending pain and rage there, aimed mostly at Thanos but also at his father and brother. She remembered waking up in a cold sweat, convinced she was back in that cell with a straitjacket pinning her arms and a shock collar on her neck. She remembered the fear in people’s minds when she passed them on the streets. She remembered all the places she’d visited, cities throughout Eastern Europe, and New York, and rural farm towns, and soaring skyscrapers, and the vibrant, pulsing, messy sprawl of humanity, of which she’d only known a tiny fraction.

For everyone Hydra had hurt, for everyone who’d been brainwashed or tortured or killed or changed by them, for everyone whose life had been upended by the mind stone, for everyone down there living on borrowed time unless Thanos was stopped—“Yes,” she said. “I can do it.”

“Good,” Clint said, and she realized he wasn’t looking at her anymore, but at Darcy. “Because I think it’s about time to go.”

Wanda looked at Darcy too. Tension. Determination. Fear. Those things she could read in Darcy’s face for the half second that Darcy looked vulnerable, and then they all vanished behind her grin as she turned back toward everyone. “Everyone up,” Darcy said. “Now’s a good time, the room’s almost empty. Wanda, can you punch a hole in the ceiling?”

Wanda looked up at it. This wouldn’t involve touching another’s mind, just a brute-force strike. Loki had taught her how to focus her power, keep it tightly controlled so none was wasted, so she only destroyed what she wanted to. “Stand back.”

They all spread out.

I need you, she willed down the bond between her and her brother.

Pietro blurred to a halt seconds later. “Ready to go?” he asked, leaning on Clint.

“Slowpoke,” Wanda said with the best smile she could manage, and raised her hands, and concentrated.

It wasn’t so different from what she’d done to break through to the children’s cells in the United Nations prison. Her power spread out of her and through the world. Her stomach roiled as she touched the walls and solid structures of the hive city, but Wanda bit back her sick and pushed harder, extending through steel and glass and stranger things she couldn’t identify until she found a cavernous open space, perfectly spherical and lined with what felt like computer stations and
command posts. She didn’t dare reach for any of the inhabitants’ minds—Thanos’ wards seemed to react even more violently to her touching minds than inanimate objects—but she could tell from their bodies that several aliens were in the room, some humanoid and most not.

Hovering in the center were two people who she was certain were Loki and Thanos.

“Ready yourselves.” Wanda said, and twisted her hands.

Four feet of solids disintegrated into chemical dust. Wanda grabbed her teammates with her mind and dragged them all through the resulting hole so they stood inside Thanos’ central hall.

She thought she’d been prepared for this, but somehow exploring it with her mind hadn’t been enough for the disorientation. The room was about a hundred and fifty meters in diameter, and every inch of it was covered with seats, desks, tables, equipment, screens, projectors, and stranger things, all the apparatuses Thanos needed to run an army from here. It was the nerve center of his forces. And gravity pulled outward no matter where you stood, so you could run around the inside of the room without ever feeling it change.

Clint staggered. Sam swore and even Steve blinked and faltered slightly.

Thanos and Loki hung in the center of the room, at an angle; their feet were pointed somewhere off to Wanda’s right. She focused on them instantly and threw up a shield as several of the aliens in the room pulled weapons and opened fire. Plasma, uncommonly dense bullets, and some kind of electron beam ricocheted off her shield.

“Enough!” Thanos bellowed.

The firing stopped. Wanda didn’t lower her shield. She wasn’t that stupid.

“How did they escape?” Thanos demanded, glaring at someone to his left.

The alien opened a wide, lipless, vertical mouth.

Sam raised his gun and fired. Wanda barely altered her shield to be one-way permeable in time for the projectile, a tiny but impossibly dense bullet, to go on its way.

The alien choked and died.

“Head shot,” Helen said. “Fifty points, nice.”

Thanos looked truly furious. Wanda’s terror ratcheted up a notch and she held herself in place. “Insolent mortals!” he roared, and pointed.

A bolt of purple energy slammed into her shield.

Wanda rolled over, ears ringing. Distant explosions shook the ground. The ground, which—curved?

Memory returned in a flash and she scrambled to her feet, no matter that her balance was shit.

Someone had stuffed her behind a table. She had no idea how long she’d been out but it was enough time for the walls to become pocked with craters and scorch marks. Loki was dueling Thanos furiously in the center of the room, and the other Avengers swarmed the walls. Bruce had transformed into the Hulk but Thanos had turned the wall to glue in a circle around him; even the Hulk’s immense strength wasn’t enough to escape quickly. No matter what edge he clawed at, it receded in more sludge, and when he tried to push off the ground, he just sank deeper. He roared in
frustration.

Pietro was zooming around the walls in a blue blur, shoving one Avenger after another out of the way as Thanos fired more purple bolts of energy at them. Wanda saw instantly that the unenhanced team members at minimum would’ve died if it wasn’t for her brother. The bolts came randomly, whenever Loki left Thanos enough of an opening to fire one. The Avengers were firing back with their stolen weapons, sometimes at Thanos and sometimes with the aliens who were invading the room, but Thanos’ armor seemed impenetrable and he ignored their strikes. Nebula was going hand-to-hand with Steve and Clint simultaneously, and holding her own.

Loki’s expression, when he turned and Wanda could see it, was inhuman. There was nothing merciful, nothing kind, nothing sane, in him in that moment. The madness she’d always sensed lying far beneath his surface had finally made an appearance.

And over all the chaos, the shouts and shots and screams, Thanos was laughing.

No one had noticed Wanda yet, so she crouched down and peered closer at Thanos. That purple energy, whatever it was, had been worryingly draining. She wasn’t sure she could block another bolt, not of the same strength. It was a miracle her shield had even held long enough to save their asses.

She just didn’t know what it was.

There. Purple gleamed on the back of Thanos’ right hand, just by his knuckles. He had some kind of golden gauntlet on, and… Wanda squinted… he turned and ducked, and for a moment in his duel with Loki, she had a perfect view of the gauntlet.

Five hollow depressions, and one glint of purple.

Wanda clenched her fists. She wanted to be wrong. Wanted to not know this.

She sent her power out in a wave, slamming through air and nausea and distance until her awareness slunk around Thanos’ limbs. Her power recoiled from his armor and she knew instinctively that she wouldn’t be able to influence his mind or motion in the slightest, but it didn’t matter. All she cared about was the stone.

Her power touched it.

A vast and unending void loomed. Beckoned. Power unimaginable, power untold, power like nothing she’d ever felt… No more would she cower on the floor, no more would she shrink from wards and Frost Giant mages and governments and armies, no more would she tolerate their fear…

Wanda didn’t realize she’d stood up and stepped out from behind the table until someone slammed into her.

She sat down hard, trembling, her ability firmly entrenched beneath her skin once more.

“Wanda,” Pietro said, out of breath. “What the hell was that? You felt… I couldn’t reach you.”

“Infinity stone,” she said, ignoring her shaking limbs. “He has an infinity stone.”


“Fine,” Wanda said, which they both knew was a lie. “I’ll be more careful.”
“Good, I gotta go,” Pietro said, and bolted. Two seconds later, he yanked Steve aside just as a violet energy beam slammed into the floor (ceiling? They were almost directly above Wanda’s head) and made another crater.

The other aliens weren’t that many, but they were better fighters than the Daavi. More formidable. Wanda saw Sam getting battered back by a group of eel-things with spines, Maria and Sharon under cover and fighting a squadron of those things with the vertical mouths, the Hulk swatting at mutated pterodactyls swooping around his head and shoulders as he fought the sludge.

Wanda reached out again. Her stomach tightened but she ignored it, ignored it all, and found and gripped the minds of every alien in the room, veering carefully around every human mind, refusing to give in to the temptation to dive into every unique and new thought process she found, and with one massive power surge, she ripped the will from each of them.

Every alien slowed, then stopped.

The pterodactyl things landed, blinking and staring at each other. Most of the others were simply staring around blankly. Weapons hung in slack hands or thumped to the floor.

Wanda barely noticed. She was too busy projectile vomiting on the floor.

“Easy,” someone said, and Pietro was there, holding her up and whisking her away. Loki had upped the tempo of his spellcasting and Sharon and Maria and Sam and Darcy had lost no time turning their fire on Thanos.

Only Nebula kept fighting, since Wanda couldn’t even sense her mind, much less control it.

“Maybe you should—” Pietro began, worry pulsing through their bond.

“No,” Wanda rasped, wiping her lips, and reached out for the Hulk with a snarl on her face.

Dragging him from the sludge took more effort than anything else she’d ever done, whether from the weight of the Hulk himself or the sticky strength of the magical glue, or both. Her body instantly rebelled as Thanos’ wards took their toll. Wanda doubled over, dry heaving since her stomach had already been emptied, throat burning and tears coming unbidden to her eyes.

The Hulk roared, and she forced herself to look up.

Just in time to see Thanos blast him with a beam of energy larger than any Wanda had ever seen.

“No!” she screamed, but it was useless. The Hulk collapsed in a senseless, possibly dead, heap.

Pietro was gone in an instant, straight for Nebula, driving her back to save Steve from a blade hidden in Nebula’s arm. Wanda didn’t care. She stared at Bruce, feeling for any trace of his mind, but there was none.

The Hulk’s skin steamed.

Bruce Banner was one of the first people to be kind to her. He’d treated her well. He knew what it was like to have people fear you for your power, for being different in a way that went beyond most people’s comprehension. He’d helped her, showed her that scientists weren’t always cruel and inhumane, that it was possible to balance a love of discovery and a fierce curiosity with ethics, with sense and compassion.

He’d taught her to trust again.
Wanda rose to her feet. Her muscles didn’t want to cooperate but while the wards attacked her body, they left her mind and power intact, so while she shuddered and staggered against a nearby desk, her fingers worked and so did her brain, and she went after Thanos with everything she had.

She was dimly aware of the green-skinned woman bursting into the room with a shout and throwing herself at Nebula, freeing the Steve and Clint to turn on Thanos fully.

She barely noticed Loki shifting to accommodate her attacks any more than was necessary to take turns with him.

She saw only Thanos’ face. Laughing. Unimpressed. Disdainful, even.

I.

Wanda slashed a hand through the air and hurled a massive chunk of concrete at him. Thanos backfisted it away.

Will.

Loki snarled the words of a spell and fire wreathed around Thanos’ head and hands, not burning but blinding him long enough for Wanda to rip up a segment of floor and slam it into his spine. He faltered, just for a second, but recovered.

Kill.

Tony was there somehow, screaming something and soaring through the air on wobbly thrusters with a massive pane of glass in his arms. Vision behind him, face terrible and cold. The mind stone sprang to life and another bolt of that yellow-gold energy shot through the air, constant and furious, screaming as it passed through the glass and hit Thanos’ armor.

You.

Now Thanos was bellowing. His armor cracked and fell away in chunks, revealing clothes and craggy skin beneath.

Vulnerable. He was vulnerable.

Wanda reached out for the first spear of steel and concrete she’d thrown, holding her body upright through sheer force of will, and yanked it forward into Thanos’ shoulder.

Just as Jane and Helen fired something they’d dragged in on a cart, and a concussive force blasted through the room. The sickness stopped assailing Wanda’s limbs. Thanos looked stunned, just for a second. His wards were gone.

Loki raised his hands, runes quivering at his fingertips, shouting the words of a spell. There was Darcy, standing beneath him, casting also, gray-faced and shaking and determined.

Thanos turned to stone from the waist down.

Darcy collapsed in a heap. Alive, but insensible. Loki sagged in the air.

For a second, they all paused. Even Gamora and Nebula—the sisters seemed to have fought to a stalemate, panting and watching Thanos struggle.

“Fools,” Thanos shouted, and his hand shot out.
Wanda screamed, but she had so little power left.

Loki went flying through the air and into the floor at Wanda’s high three o’clock. Bones crunched. He dented the floor and groaned, blood leaking from his mouth.

Shots flew at Thanos. Violet flared inches from his skin and the projectiles fell harmlessly to the ground. Steve shouted for them to stop firing.

“Fools,” Thanos said again. He wasn’t laughing anymore, at least. They’d bothered him. Wanda took comfort from that even as she despaired. “I have an infinity stone. Your pet mage is skilled, but no living being can match the power I command in my hand!” He waved his right fist, then pointed at Loki. The power stone gleamed mockingly.

Limping, Natasha stepped over a twisted desk and stood between Loki and Thanos.

*Brother,* Wanda thought, and then Pietro was there, carrying both of them to stand by Loki’s side.

Steve jogged their direction, wiping blood off his face. And Sam. Clint. Maria. Tony, ashen-faced, rose from the Hulk’s side and joined them. Jane and Helen dragged Darcy to her feet not far away. Vision was the last to land near them, standing a little to the side with a resolute expression.

Thanos rolled his eyes, and Wanda realized—their show of bravery, of standing over their fallen friend, had simply given him an opportunity to strike them all down at once.

Chapter End Notes

THE SOLAR ECLIPSE IS PASSING OVER MY HOUSE RIGHT NOW
I'M TOO FAR NORTH TO SEE THE TOTALITY BUT THERE'S A CORNER OF IT AND THE LIGHTING IS SO FREAKING WEIRD

BUT SO COOL

*SCREAMING INSIDE*
Chapter 183

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Unknown Location, Thanos’ Hive-city

May 2012

“You don’t want to kill us,” Darcy croaked.

“Darcy,” Loki moaned from her feet. He struggled to sit up. Pain stabbed every part of him, deep in his internal organs, and every one of his ribs felt cracked, and he was fairly sure his pelvis was in multiple pieces, but he had to go to her.

“And why not?” Thanos sneered.

Loki blinked. Forced himself to concentrate.

Darcy grinned at him. It was a savage thing, all the cruelty of her rising to the surface with no veneer of humor or normality on top, either because she wanted Thanos to see it or was too tired to care, and Loki had never felt more strongly for anyone than he did in that moment for her. “You’d have done it already,” she said. “You had us at your mercy in those cells. But no, you want to gloat, to mock. You want us as spoils of war to bear witness to your victory. You want to spend eons breaking us, turning us to your cause so you can laugh at how you’ve turned your greatest enemies into your slaves. So go ahead.” She spread her arms. “Blast us. Take us all down to get to him. Take your hollow victory.”

This, Loki thought half-deliriously. This is why I chose you.

Thanos, impossibly, grinned back. “You’re clever,” he said. “For a mortal. I see why you’ve caught the Liesmith’s attention. But you really ought to know the truth about him, foolish mortal witch.” He pointed at Loki again.

Loki’s back arched, and he couldn’t help but scream. The pain was blinding, deafening, all-encompassing. He couldn’t smell or hear or think.

But he could feel the last of his seidr collapsing into dust as his body tried to heal itself.

And without it… he changed.

The pain receded a bit, and Loki recovered just enough awareness to look down and see the blue of his skin, the lines on it, and be afraid.

“He’s a Frost Giant,” Thanos laughed. “The great foes of Asgard and Midgard and Vanaheim alike, the conquerors, the monsters. See who you protect!”

“You fucking dumbass,” Clint said, and raised his gun, and fired.

Thanos was too slow. The laser beam caught him in the shoulder, just where Wanda had hurled a twisted spike of torn metal, driving it in deeper. Thanos bellowed loud enough to shake the walls and flailed at Clint, but his strike went wide and he lost his position in the zero-gravity center of the room, crashing to the floor almost directly on the other side of the room from them.

“Don’t look so weirded out,” Sam said, not unkindly, glancing down at Loki. “Bruce told us.”

*Bruce. Of course.* Loki shoved aside his grief for the scientist. This was a war, and he hadn’t expected there to be no casualties. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out, which was probably for the best because he had no idea what he wanted to say.

“Nebula!” Thanos roared, struggling to rise, to move. Violet shields still pulsed over his skin. “*Gamora! Kill the archer!*”

“No,” Gamora sneered.

Loki turned his head, ignoring the uncomfortable grinding of his vertebrae and the way his temple thunked against the floor, to see her standing beside Nebula some distance away. Nebula was scowling but resolute, and Gamora faced their father with nothing but cold fury on her face.

“*Treachery?*” Thanos hissed.

Loki wanted his body healed for the sole purpose of voicing one of the many sarcastic comments that sprang to mind.

“No shit,” James spat.

That is also sufficient.

“We are your slaves no longer, Father,” Gamora said. “We won’t stand for the subjugation of an entire realm.”

“They are pathetic,” Thanos hissed, struggling to move. Even now, knowing that his body struggled to heal, Loki grinned at the stone of the Titan’s lower body. It was truly one of his greatest spells. “Weak, foolish, short-lived mortals—”

Nebula, Loki knew, didn’t disagree. But he’d seen enough to know Thanos didn’t treat either of them well. Apparently that had been enough.

“Shut up,” Nebula rasped angrily. “I don’t care about the mortals, but I care about seeing you fall, and they seem the only people who’ve come close.” She surveyed them with her eerie dark eyes. “I like these odds.”

“They’ll not protect him anymore,” Thanos snarled, “and the Jotun is their best hope.”

“You’re the fool,” Gamora said. “Look at what’s before your eyes, Thanos. They’ll protect him until their dying breaths.”

Loki looked around himself even as Thanos did, and saw that it was true.

Darcy shrugged off Jane’s support and knelt at his side, helping him sit slightly upright.

A thousand questions sprang to mind, from *Why are you helping me still to do you not care what I am*, and Darcy seemed to read all of them in his eyes. “I don’t give a fuck what color your skin is,” she whispered. “Dumbass. You could’ve said something and avoided all this drama.”

Impossibly, he started to laugh.
It hurt, too, more than he could’ve imagined, but Loki didn’t stop laughing as he sat up, as his shattered skeleton shrieked in agonized protest, as Darcy fed him the last of her *seidr* to repair the worst damage to his body.

Because he saw it now. So clearly.

The Casket hadn’t responded to his call because he hadn’t fully wanted it. Accepted what it would mean to call it to him—that he was the heir to Jotunheim, that he was the rightful king of one of the Nine Realms, that his birth father was Laufey and not Odin. And he’d never accepted it because he knew the Aesir would never accept *him*.

But when Darcy didn’t flinch back from his vivid red eyes, he decided he didn’t need the Aesir’s acceptance. Only theirs. The Avengers, his team.

So when he lifted his hands and spun them before him, the Casket came.

He had no *seidr* left, but Laufey had not been a mage, and Loki needed no *seidr* now to raise the Casket and call forth its power.

Ice and wind and freezing temperatures howled across the room at Thanos. The Titan bellowed, struggling to rise, blasting away with his infinity stone, but Loki knew the Titan’s own *seidr* was gone now, only the stone’s power, the parasitic attachment between it and him, was keeping Thanos alive.

James and Steve and the others surged forward instantly, sprinting across the floor toward Thanos, firing away. Wanda, despite the trembling that wracked her entire body, raised her hands and called forth one twisted bit of debris after another to hurl at Thanos, pulling the room apart from inside. Darcy stepped behind Loki, hands on his shoulders, offering what physical and magical support she could.

But Loki knew it wouldn’t be enough. The infinity stone was by name and nature infinite. It would outlast the Casket, outlast the Avengers, outlast even Thanos.

“*How do we take it from him?*” Darcy screamed over the roaring winds of the Casket.

Loki dragged his gaze to the side. Gamora. The daughter, the one he’d suspected had purposes running counter to Thanos’. He’d been right, as usual. She charged into the tempest, fighting the winds swirling around Darcy and Loki, until she was close enough to speak.

“Sacrifice!” Gamora shouted. “A sacrifice of equal power!”

*Impossible*.

But then Loki realized that it was not.

And that Vision, Wanda, Jane, and Helen were all close enough behind to hear him, too.

“No,” Wanda screamed, grabbing for Vision and leaving off her attack on Thanos entirely.

Vision shook her off. “Loki,” he said.

Loki met the creature’s eyes. It was the only way.

He nodded once and shut the Casket off abruptly.

In the silence that followed, the other Avengers faltered for just a second, and Vision flew up into the
middle of the room. Jane and Helen caught Wanda’s arms.

Vision lowered his head. Closed his eyes.

The mind stone fell from him in a slow, graceful arc, and his body collapsed limply to the floor.

“No,” Thanos screamed, clawing at his own hand.

The violet energy pulsed and raged.

Loki knew fear, then, like he never had before. “Get back here,” he bellowed, and the other Avengers were running, and Wanda was sobbing, and Loki dropped the Casket and turned and grabbed her and shouted “We will all die unless you do something,” and she raised her shaking hands just as the Avengers who’d been over shooting at Thanos slammed into their group, and Loki heard a tiny gasp and the shockingly small thump of her body hitting the floor.

He turned in slow motion.

Darcy, he howled, but maybe it was only inside his head, because Wanda didn’t seem to notice that Darcy had been knocked aside.

Darcy scrambled to her feet.

The red shield formed.

A pulse of concussive, violet energy roared through the room and shredded around Wanda’s shield for the second time, although this was the first time Loki had been inside it, and he could feel that this was much more power than had been there before. This was an infinity stone breaking free of a wielder who could no longer use it.

This was raw energy of a kind not seen since Malekith the Dark Elf tried to use the Aether and bring the Realms to darkness, millennia before Loki had even been born.

This was something no mortal could survive.

Loki hurled himself at Wanda’s barrier, and knew no more.

Unknown Location, Thanos’ Hive City

May 2012

I shouldn’t be alive right now.

Darcy groaned. Her entire body hurt more than she would’ve thought possible. She remembered stepping backwards and tripping and sprawling over the ground; she remembered Loki’s irate and terrified expression, remembered Wanda’s shield separating them, and then…

Darcy blinked.

“Darcy,” Loki rasped, and she almost broke right there at the relief in his voice and the impossible, heady sensation that came with not being dead.

She opened her eyes and grinned at him like a loon. “Hey,” she said, feeling like her words were slurred. “Can we get… ice cream?”
He looked like he was trying not to laugh.

Darcy hauled herself upright using Loki and Jane’s shoulders, sorting through her jumbled head. It felt like someone had come through and knocked all her thoughts down off their shelves and now she had to clean up the mess. “I… Wanda. Vision?”

Helen’s face was grim. She pointed.

Wanda was kneeling by Vision’s body. Tony and Steve and the others clustered around, looking morose.

“Over there,” Darcy said, since words still weren’t lining up in her head like they should, and she and Loki staggered over there, staying upright mostly by leaning on each other while Jane hovered around them and Helen walked at their side, keeping a sharp eye on Darcy’s balance.

The circle shifted easily to accommodate their arrival. Sam squeezed Darcy’s shoulder wordlessly, and Pietro nodded at her, but most of the attention was on Vision.

“Defibrillator?” Steve asked, ignoring the obvious (to Darcy) question of where exactly they were going to find a defibrillator on this ship.

“The stone was what animated his consciousness,” Tony said hoarsely. “And gave him such precise control of himself, and stabilized the bonds between his cells and the vibranium. Without it…” He shook his head.

“Come back,” Wanda whispered.

“He’s gone,” Pietro said quietly, putting a hand on his sister’s shoulder.

Unknown Location, Thanos’ Hive City

May 2012

Wanda shook her head mutely.

Loki frowned at the mind stone, sitting placidly on the floor.

Sam reached for it.

“No!” Loki said, grabbing his wrist. “If you touch it, you’ll die. No human can withstand it. Not even me, not… as weakened as I am.”

He had only been entirely drained of seidr once before in his life, centuries ago, when he was less skilled and expended all his power on a foolish spell. It was a terrifying sensation. Without the constant hum of his magic, Loki felt weak, vulnerable, exposed, incomplete.

It wasn’t entirely gone. Already a thin trickle had pooled at the very base of his reserves, not enough to do more than light a candle, but immensely reassuring nonetheless.

“I’m not letting him die too,” Wanda said through gritted teeth, and splayed her fingers.

Loki felt a tiny bit of her power flare, all that was left, and the mind stone lifted off the ground, red and gold sparks snapping around it.
Wanda moaned through her teeth.

Loki called up the tiny bit of power that had returned to him and reached into her mind.

She was caught. Ensnared by the seductive call of the infinity stone. Loki had felt it before, and he knew its terrible power, but he had fought the influence of this stone on his mind before, and he managed to keep his head.

*Ignore it*, he willed her. *Focus on me.*

Slowly, slowly, Wanda’s attention turned to his presence.

*Move it. Ignore the pull. This is not for you or me.*

*Think of Vision.*

Wanda blinked in slow motion. Loki watched the world through her eyes as well as his own. Felt the trembling and the pain and lingering ward-sickness she fought past to lift the infinity stone. The stone, though—it recognized her power, knew she’d been made of it at some point or other, and aligned nicely to her purposes.

It slid through the air and back into its place on Vision’s forehead.

He gasped and jerked, seizing.

“Grab him!” Steve said, and the other Avengers were piling onto Vision’s limbs to hold him down, and Loki wrenched himself out of Wanda’s mind before he used all his power and was lost, and Vision seemed too far gone to remember he could turn his limbs intangible and escape them all with ease.

Wanda collapsed in slow motion. Pietro and Loki caught her, and then her weight on Loki’s body reminded him that his skeleton had a lot of fractures that weren’t supposed to be there, and he slumped to the side as well. Pietro kept Wanda upright but Loki crashed to the ground.

“Norns,” he swore, and rolled over, looking across the disorienting room. “This is painful.”

Darcy flopped down beside him. “You gonna live?”

He took stock of his aches. He’d been battered around worse than this before. The Hulk, in fact, had struck more and worse blows than Thanos’ backhand into the floor. “Yes,” he said. “It is only… my lack of *seidr* keeping me… from healing.” He winced as he reached down and tangled his fingers with hers, still not understanding how *she* was alive but willing to leave that for later. “I will survive.”

“Good,” Darcy whispered, gripping his hand tightly. “Good.”

Vision blinked and sat up. “How…”

“Wanda,” Sharon said, not a little awe in her voice. “She put it back in your head.”

Vision raised a hand to his face and ran his fingers slowly over the mind stone. It gleamed, passive and content to stay there once more. “Wanda…”

“She’s alive,” Pietro announced. “Just unconscious.”

“She’ll recover,” Loki said roughly. “With sleep, and time, and an intravenous drip would not be
remiss.”

“Excuse me.”

Loki dragged himself to a sitting position and glared at Gamora. “What?”

“Two things,” Gamora said. “Thanos is still alive. And so is the beast.”

Loki’s eyes flew wide. He struggled forward.

“Easy, easy,” Darcy said.

Tony and Jane ran for the Hulk instantly. Steve and the others followed more slowly. The Hulk’s hand twitched when Bruce and Jane reached him.

Loki was glad for Bruce. But Thanos—Thanos was still alive. He didn’t have time for relief.

“Get me up,” he snarled, glaring across the room at Thanos’ body. Now that he was looking, the Titan was breathing wetly. His legs were still stone, and the power stone was nowhere to be seen or felt, but Thanos was alive.

Darcy’s hands tightened on Loki’s shoulders, and a wave of energy passed from her to him. He didn’t stop to wonder where it had come from, where she’d recovered enough of her *seidr* to give him this, or why it felt different. He could worry about those things later. He would deal with *all* of it later.

The energy was enough to heal himself to the point that Loki could stand upright and walk. So he did, picking his way resolutely through the debris scattered around the room, navigating the curve of the floor until he reached Thanos, Nebula and Gamora and Darcy following cautiously behind. They were of no concern in this moment.

Loki stood over Thanos and looked down at his vanquished enemy.

Chapter End Notes

I was so tempted to leave you with only that first segment, but these were always meant to be posted together and I've been mean enough lately. Have an actual cliffie resolution for once. :)}
Chapter 184

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Unknown Location, Thanos’ Hive City

May 2012

With Bruce supported between Steve and Tony, the ragged group made its way over to Thanos. Loki looked up at them as they arrived. He’d tucked away some of the freaky instability Clint had seen in him during the fight, but hate and destruction still glittered in his eyes and twisted his face into something worse than human. “He breathes,” Loki said. “Though not for much longer. I thought to offer you the courtesy of any final words or wounds you’d like to deliver.”

Clint looked down at Thanos. The Titan either wouldn’t move, or couldn’t; his breaths came wet and heavy, and his left arm looked more or less useless after debris had been stabbed through his shoulder. “I’d kick him in the balls, but they’re stone right now,” Clint said. “So how’s this.” He stepped forward and grabbed a chunk of concrete.

[If anyone doesn’t want to read torture, skip the rest of the chapter and go to the endnotes for a summary of what happens.]

Thanos was massive enough that lying on his back like this, his chin was still as tall as Clint’s waist. He got close enough to see Thanos’ dilated pupils, raised the concrete block, and slammed it down into Thanos’ nose.

It shattered with a wet, satisfying crunch.

“Yowch,” Sam said apathetically.

Tony just looked down at Thanos, fury and satisfaction warring in his eyes. “Good riddance,” he said.

Steve shifted his weight. He’d probably have crossed his arms, but he was holding Bruce upright.

“I’m going to kill him,” Loki said. “It will not be a kind death. If you do not wish to witness it, I suggest you wait outside.” He looked at Gamora and Nebula. “I presume you can lead us to one of the portals that will return us to Midgard.”

Gamora nodded.

“And will either of you interfere to save his life?” Loki asked.

“Nebula,” Thanos moaned. “Gamora. I’m your father. I raised you…”

Gamora spat on him. “You tortured us. You stole any chance I might have had of a normal childhood.”

“And you turned us both into freaks,” Nebula added in her rasping, metallic voice. She leaped into the air and landed on Thanos’ chest, then stomped on the twisted metal still driven through his shoulder. His bellow of pain sent dust shivering into the air.
“I’ll take that as a no,” Loki said with a curling smile.

“I don’t want to watch,” Sharon said. “I won’t stop you, but I don’t want to watch.”

“I’m staying,” Tony said quietly.

Maria took his place supporting Bruce without a word. She and Steve and Bruce and Sharon headed for a door Gamora pointed out. Pietro, Wanda, Sam, Helen, and Jane followed without a word.

Clint looked down at Thanos on the floor and didn’t move.

Loki gave him and Tony and appraising look. Darcy was there at his back, quiet for once, looking down. Clint thought something seemed off about her eyes but couldn’t put his finger on what it was.

A short sword appeared in Loki’s hand out of nowhere, four feet long and razor sharp. He looked down at Thanos with a calculated examination that made Thanos try to scramble backwards.

“None of that,” Loki said, leaping up onto Thanos’ stomach, smiling cruelly. He stabbed the sword down through Thanos’ good shoulder and staked him to the floor. Dark blueish blood oozed out of the wound while Thanos panted through his teeth.

“A curse on you, Laufeyson,” Thanos snarled. “A curse on you and all you hold dear—”

“You’ve not enough seidr left for that,” Loki said, and pulled another knife out of the air, then sliced off two fingers from Thanos’ right hand as the Titan tried to hit him. “And I tire of your threats.”

He leaped down off of Thanos’ body and walked around him as Thanos struggled to pull away.

Tony crossed his arms.

Thanos clamped his lips together, but Loki stabbed the dagger through his teeth hard enough to break several of them, twisted the blade to wedge his mouth open, reached inside, and tore out Thanos’ tongue with one savage motion.

Thanos howled.

This is justice, Clint thought. This is retribution. Revenge. Well-earned pain.

He didn’t blame the others for not wanting to watch. Part of him didn’t want to watch, either. But Clint had never hated any single person like he did Thanos, aside from Fury, and he got some kind of twisted satisfaction from watching some of the suffering Thanos had created return to him at Loki’s hands.

It was not a pleasant death.

Chapter End Notes

Summary for anyone who didn't feel like reading about Loki torturing Thanos:

-Gamora and Nebula both decided to not only not interfere, but watch.
-Tony, Clint, and Darcy stay to watch also; everyone else decides that they either aren’t
going to stop Loki killing Thanos painfully or that Thanos should die painfully but they
don't want to watch, and leaves to wait outside.

I'm sorry for the inconvenience if this was a bother to anyone.
Unknown Location, Thanos’ Hive City

May 2012

The city trembled with distant explosions.

Natasha and Zima ignored the sounds. They had a separate mission. Gamora had bolted off, saying she had to go “deal with Nebula,” leaving them to continue alone in the direction she’d pointed them.

They saw no more of Thanos’ people in the city. Gamora had said they were all called in for a fight not long ago, meaning the rest of the team had mounted their attack. Natasha couldn’t bring herself to worry about them. It was difficult enough to keep herself from bolting headlong after their target and probably get herself killed.

“This hall?” Zima asked.

“No, fourth right.”

He nodded, and they continued.

“Here.”

“Third ship we pass?”

She nodded.

The ship was ugly but spacious inside, and it reeked of Daavi slime. Natasha wrinkled her nose at the inch-thick coating of multicolored slime on the ceiling. Clearly there were more Daavi here of the kind that had assaulted them in the base in Canada.

“Eyes up,” Zima muttered, clearly remembering the same thing.

Natasha touched her belt, refamiliarizing herself with the way the teeth she’d broken out of one alien’s jaw to use as knives were wedged in place and how she should angle them on the draw. It would cut her palms, and she only wanted to use them as a last resort, but any weapon was better than none.

They stepped around a patch of unidentifiable brownish fluid on the floor.

A snatch of a shout reached them, then subsided. It was familiar.

Natasha and Zima swapped anticipatory glances and crept closer to the voice.

It quickly resolved into multiple voices. A violent argument made almost comical by either a nonsentient translating program, an AI, or an android having to repeat everything said by both sides in two different language. One party was speaking English, and the other a language Natasha didn’t recognize that was comprised of breathy whistling noises and hisses that she didn’t think a human could imitate.
The voice using English was definitely one she knew.

They were arguing about whether to send a squadron of something called Chappen through the portal to Earth. This confirmed several things Gamora had told them: one, there was friction between Thanos’ human allies and and his alien staff; two, there was one active portal left on the ship, located here; and three, their target wouldn’t have left Earth yet, which gave them a golden opportunity.

Zima looked a question at her. How many do you think are in there?

I don’t care. She smirked at him, reached around him, and raised a stolen gun. The ‘door’ to the room they needed was really an elliptical hole in the wall filled by a faintly humming opaque force field. She didn’t want to bother with trying to bring it down and just shot a large hole in the wall, dove through, and came up firing.

Pterodactyls hissed and shrieked. A few of them charged. Natasha fired until they got too close, then dropped the gun and launched herself over their heads in a somersault. Two of them tried to take off, but Zima brought them down with his gun and then tore into the pack with knives in both hands.

Leaving her free to roll up on a knee and throw one of her improvised daggers.

The tooth flipped end over end, poorly balanced and unevenly sharp, but she’d had worse weapons to deal with and her aim was true. It sank almost up to the jagged base into Nick Fury’s thigh seconds before he dove through the portal, a large, irregular oval of impenetrable darkness, at the other end of the room. He choked on a gasp and fell to his knee.

“Easy there,” Natasha crooned, standing up and walking closer. The sounds of death and pain behind her continued, but she’d let Zima handle that. He was better equipped to, anyway—the pterodactyl aliens were fearsome but light, and his extra mass gave him an edge against them. “Can’t have you running off. I’d have to hunt you down again.”

“Romanoff,” Fury said, glaring at her. He dragged himself to his feet. Already he’d put aside the pain enough to ignore four inches of alien tooth lodged in his quadriceps. “Come for your revenge?”

“What else were you expecting?” She drew closer. He really wasn’t so fearsome, in person. Tall and broad and strong, highly trained, ruthless, calculating, and brilliant, armed with his wits and his experience and a counterintelligence and combat training program that was the pinnacle of thousands of years of humanity’s collective experience distrusting and killing each other, but in the end, he was just a man. He was only human.

She was so much more.

“I was expecting you to have the courtesy to stay locked up in your cell,” Fury said.

They were only five feet apart now. The portal was another eight or so feet behind him. He was smart enough to know that in his present condition, he’d never reach it before she did. Of course, if by some quirk of chance he did get through, she’d just follow. It would make things more difficult—the aliens on the other side would quickly realize their general was in danger, and come to his aid—but she would make it work. She’d kill every last one of the Daavi if that was what it took.

“Because I’ve really set a precedent for being content in a cage.”

His good eye narrowed slightly. “I heard what the United Nations did to you. Unfortunate.”

“Don’t pretend to care,” she said contemptuously, circling slowly to one side. Fury shifted back a step, then another, creeping closer to the portal. Natasha stepped farther over. She was partially
cutting off his escape now. Based on the increased tension in his shoulders, he knew it. “You and
Thanos did the exact same thing to us just now.”

“At least we didn’t slap a torture device on the Maximoff girl,” Fury said. “The cells were a
temporary measure. We’d hoped you might eventually understand our purposes, and help us.”

Fury’s eyes fastened on something over her shoulder just before Zima stepped up next to her,
breathing hard and deftly bandaging a wound on his right bicep. “Help you murder two thirds of the
human race and enslave the rest to a hostile alien warlord?” Zima said. “Remind me how that’s in
any way a good idea.”

“Because humanity is fractured,” Fury said intensely. “Divided. We can’t stop fighting each other,
we can’t stop hating for the stupidest goddamn reasons. We’re messy and shallow and self-
destructive. We’re tearing ourselves and our planet apart. We needed to be controlled.”

“So it’s the old Hydra line,” Zima said wearily. “You do realize you’re sacrificing the personal
freedoms of thought, action, and speech—and just about everything else—at the altar of stability and
order, right? That is the definition of fascism.”

Fury shrugged. “Fascism also historically includes a healthy dose of hate towards a certain group of
people for no good reason.”

“Because that’s the only way to make authoritarianism work,” Zima said. “Hitler, Stalin, Mao,
Castro—they all focused their people on a certain group inside their societies and told them these are
the enemies, these are the people to blame for all your troubles. In Germany, it was Jews, it was the
Roma, it was black people, it was disabled people, it was anyone who dared think or act outside the
norm. In Russia, it was the bourgeoisie. In China, the intellectual elite and Kuomintang government
who Mao said pandered to foreign powers and kept China from advancing. In Cuba, it was Batista’s
supporters, it was wealthy landowners and the plantation elite. There has to be hate or that kind of
control just falls apart.”

Natasha stared at him. “You’ve been studying your history.”

“I fought in World War 2,” Zima said, glaring at Fury. “I know what fascism and authoritarianism
look like better than most people in this century. Hitler came close to conquering most of Europe. I’m
not letting that happen again.”

“But can’t you agree that humanity needs to change?” Fury argued. He was resolute. Conviction
shone in every inch of his posture, every nuance of his voice. “If we want to keep from tearing
ourselves apart—”

“Since the second world war, instances of conflict between countries that escalated to the use of
armed forces has decreased dramatically,” Natasha said. “The first world war was supposed to be the
‘war to end all wars,’ but the staggering death toll of the second seems to have scared us into
searching for other options.” She thought about all the places she’d been, the cultures she’d learned
about so she could assimilate to some degree and pass unnoticed, the people she’d met all around the
globe. “Sure, humanity is messy. But we’re learning. We can figure out how to not self-destruct
without being beaten into enslavement.”

“Never thought you’d buy the hold-hands-and-sing-kumbayah line, Natasha,” Fury said. “What did
they do to make you so soft?”

Natasha laughed. The moment was going to her head, just a little—making her almost giddy. Here
was her foe, her nemesis, the man she’d most wanted dead out of all this, standing in front of her and
trying to save his own sorry life by convincing her he was right. “I’m not saying we should stop all wars,” she said with a curling smile. “Sometimes warfare is necessary. I know conflict in human society will never go away.”

“The difference is that we think it’s healthy for there to be conflict,” Zima said. He glanced at Natasha. “Was it Franklin who said that thing about how conflict in a democracy is necessary to point out where something is wrong?”

“Jefferson, I think.”

“Right.” He looked back at Fury, whose face remained impassive. “Got any more bullshit arguments tucked in that ridiculous coat of yours?”

“Nope,” Fury said, spreading his hands. “I’m all out of bullshit. But I’ve got a real argument for you.”

“You’re stalling,” Natasha said. “You think Thanos will kill our teammates and then come save you.”

Fury half smiled. “The thought had crossed my mind.”

“Unfortunate,” Natasha said. “Whether or not they win, you’ll still be dead by the time anyone comes for you.”

“We’re not so different,” Fury said, looking back and forth between both of them. “You really think the world will accept you when you go back? Carry you around on your shoulders as heroes? It’ll never happen. People hate the things they fear, and they’re afraid of you.”

Zima raised his eyebrows. “That was actually decent. But you missed something significant.”

Natasha grinned at Fury. “We’re counting on their fear.”

The smooth reddish stone in her pocket vibrated.

Natasha pulled it out. “Gamora?”

“Here.” The other woman’s voice came through the stone with no distortion whatsoever. It sounded as if she were right in the room. “My father has been defeated.”

Fury let out a sound of shock and fear, quickly stifled.

Natasha watched him as she spoke, drinking in the fear he could no longer quite hide. He was smart enough to know he couldn’t run. “Glad to hear it. We’ve got this rat under control, too.”

There was a pause. “Your teammates want to know what you’re going to do with him.”

“Kill him,” Natasha said easily. “We can tell everyone on Earth he died in the fight.”

“Tony Stark says to tell you he’s added all of your faces and voice patterns to the city’s network. You have unlimited access. Nebula and I are sending the rest of them to you. You can take the portal home, and we’ll handle the city.”

“Where will you go?”

Gamora paused. “I’m not sure. We’ll figure something out.”
Muffled voices.

“Your teammates are offering us a temporary stay in your Tower.” Gamora’s voice was completely emotionless.

Zima shrugged.

“No argument here,” Natasha said. “If you want, I’m sure we can make Tony convert another few storage rooms to bedrooms.”

“He’s complaining.”


“Nebula has agreed,” Gamora said. “We’ll bring your team to you shortly.”

Natasha frowned, looking at Fury. He was tense and frozen in the middle of the room, with both the Winter Soldier and the Black Widow between him and his best hope of escape.

She considered all the myriad ways she could think of to kill him.

“Gamora,” she said. “Can you give me directions to an airlock?”

Fury’s eyes widened. Beside her, Zima slowly smiled.

It looked nothing like airlocks did in the movies, but with Gamora’s help via the speaking stone, Natasha had little trouble working the controls.

She and Zima threw Fury into the pressure chamber and slammed the door down on the threshold before he could pick himself up again. They’d had to stab him a few more times. Well, technically, they could’ve just knocked him out, but stabbing him in multiple places to keep him immobile had been more fun.

He leaped up and threw himself at the door. There was a clear plate in it and Natasha had an excellent view of his rage as he beat his fists on the door. He was shouting something.

“Impressive soundproofing,” Zima said conversationally. “I can’t hear a word he’s saying.”

Natasha lifted the speaking stone. “Is there an intercom?”

“Put your hand in the hollow space by the door,” Gamora said. Natasha found the hollow, a soft-edge space the size of a soccer ball, and slid her hand inside. Light sprang up around it instantly, gloving her fingers in a sheen of blue and controls gleaming around the inside of the hollow.

“There should be a symbol that looks like a circle with four hash marks inside,” Gamora said.

Natasha squatted down and peered inside. “Kind of on the right side?”

“That’s it.”

“If I take my hand out after I press it, will that cause problems?”

“No.”
Natasha touched the button.

Fury’s ranting voice instantly started playing from a hidden speaker. “—dare leave me in here, do you really think the UN won’t want me to stand trial—”

“We’ll tell them you died in the fight,” Natasha said, grinning at him. It was her Black Widow smile, one he’d never seen because only her victims and Zima ever did, and he actually backed up a step. His skin took on a greyish cast. “No one will ever look for you, and if they do…” She shrugged.

“What do you want, Romanoff?” Fury said. “Name your price.”

“For your life?” She raised an eyebrow. “There is nothing that could convince me to spare you. Nothing you have, nothing anyone could give me.”

“Not even his life?” Fury said, and a gleam of triumph came to his eyes as he pointed over her shoulder.

Natasha swung around.

A door built into the curving organic walls of the hive city slid aside, revealing a small, unassuming, brown-haired man on the other side of a sheet of glass.

He smiled.

“Longing,” he said.

Natasha whirled on Zima. “Run.”

But he was frozen, staring at the man.

“Rusted.”

She tried to drag him but he was larger and heavier, and when it came down to a direct contest of strength, he would beat her every time. He didn’t budge.


* Loki, your meddling better hold. * Natasha swallowed her desperation and fell perfectly still, watching Zima’s face.

He was completely impassive, even to her. Simply staring at the small man behind the glass.

“Homecoming. One. Freight car.”

The little man cocked his head, an insufferably smarmy smirk playing around his mouth. “Soldier, kill yourself if she doesn’t release Nick Fury.”

“No,” Zima growled, and raised his alien gun, and fired at the glass.

It buckled.

The little man’s eyes widened and Natasha’s heart almost beat out of her chest.

She lifted her own weapon, the one that punched holes in walls, and blasted away at the glass. When it shattered, the little man behind it was gone.
Zima looked at her, hesitant.

“Go,” she said.

He vanished in an instant.

Natasha stalked back to the airlock. “I don’t know who that was or where he learned the trigger words,” she said to Fury, who looked like someone had just forced him to drink a gallon of gasoline. “But he’s a dead man now, and this is the second time you’ve used him to try and take my Soldier away from me. There won’t be a third.” She found the pad on the wall that Gamora had said activated the decompression of the airlock. “Any last words?”

Fury stepped back from the wall. He lifted his chin and met her eyes defiantly through the glass, standing rock still in the middle of the airlock. Natasha had to give him credit for discipline. He really was a formidable enemy.

“I respected you once,” she said suddenly. “Counted you a great ally. I was willing to work for you by my own choice, Nick Fury, because I believed you a good man. I saw a lot of myself in you, and admired you for it. Shame you had to throw all that away.”

“We’re not so different,” he repeated, glaring at her. “One day you’ll look back and realize you walked in my footsteps. You’ll learn the same things I did, about humanity, and realize I was right, and regret this.”

For just a second, Natasha considered it. Their eyes were still locked through the glass and the distance separating them, and she knew that in another universe, he’d have been right. She might well have turned into a new version of Fury, convinced humanity had to be subjugated for its own good, if it hadn’t been for Zima. For her teammates, her family, her Avengers, who reminded her what it was to care for other people, and trust them implicitly.

“You’re wrong,” she said with quiet conviction. “We Avengers have a new generation of enhanced children in our debt, and we’ll train and raise them to remember their gifts are strengths no matter whether the world hates and fears them for what they can do. And you’re about to die, Nick Fury. Thanos is dying at Loki’s hands as we speak. Think about the fact that your legacy, Hydra, the invasion of Earth, it all dies with you, but the Avengers will live on at least a generation more.”

Fury had always been a man of vision; physical pain meant little to him, especially in the face of his pursuit of his ideal for the world. His eyes widened a fraction at her words, and for the first time, she saw the fear in him. The terror that every human faced at the thought of death, and worse, the realization that everything he’d tried to do with his life was for nothing.

It was the worst thing she could think of to do to him before he died.

He folded his hands behind his back and locked his jaw. Defiant to the end.

Natasha decided that they’d said everything that needed saying, and slowly dragged up the touch bar on the control.

She wasn’t going to vent the airlock, because if you exhaled you could survive up to two minutes in space, and she wasn’t willing to risk one of Thanos’ allies in a smaller ship picking Fury up and saving his life. Also because she wanted to watch him die.

[Warning: if you don’t want to read someone dying unpleasantly due to decompression in a vacuum, skip to the next bit of bold italicized text. It’s not super graphic, but still.]
For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then Fury began involuntarily breathing hard, then gasping, as air rushed out of the airlock. His hands began spasmodically opening and closing, and his careful composure disappeared, revealing naked terror and desperation. He stumbled forward across the airlock and beat his fists on the door, trying to shout, but his body wouldn’t let him waste air on screaming when it was too busy trying to breathe.

Natasha could’ve sucked the air out faster, but she wasn’t going to grant him the mercy of a clean death.

More air swept out, and without external pressure, the water in his skin cells and within the outer layer of his body tissue began to vaporize. He began to balloon, contained only by his clothes. Natasha knew he wouldn’t actually burst, since human skin was too strong for that, and if he was recompressed soon he’d survive, but it was entertaining to watch.

His mouth opened in a silent, desperate scream.

He had the sense to exhale, so his lungs didn’t collapse. Natasha was vaguely disappointed. She’d have liked to see him die twitching with blood in the corners of his mouth but instead he just passed out after a minute or so due to lack of oxygen and collapsed on the floor.

He did twitch a bit. Satisfyingly.

[Vacuum death over. We return to the regularly scheduled lesser degrees of graphic dying.]

Zima returned with blood on his hands and face at the two-point-five-minute mark. Fury’s corpse was almost unrecognizable from the decompression.

“Who was he?” Natasha asked.

Zima rubbed his sleeve over his mouth. She watched the way his prosthetic arm moved and was amazed, not for the first time, at how exactly Tony had made it match Zima’s skin tone, his musculature, the shape and size of his other hand, the length of his natural right arm. The precision with which it moved was uncanny. If she didn’t know better, and if his shirt covered the fusion between prosthesis and shoulder, you’d never be able to tell it was fake. “He had some sob story about losing people he loved in New York, and then the rest of them in Sokovia. Made a promise to get his payback. He spent ages studying us, doing research, and found the... trigger words in an old Hydra base.”

Natasha looked a question at the blood on Zima’s hands and splattered across his chest, neck, and jaw.

He examined his hands, gloved in red up past the edges of his black shirt. “He’s dead.”

“It wasn’t quick.” She didn’t bother to make it a question.

A hint of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “No.”

She nodded and looked back at Fury’s body. It had been three minutes now. No way he was still alive.

“Vent him?” Zima said.

Natasha nodded slowly, jaw tight. “I wish it could’ve been slower,” she said, barely above a whisper.
“No way to pay him back fully for all the harm he did,” Zima said quietly. “You did what you could.”

She nodded, and reached out, and pressed the faintly pulsing red symbol on the pad.

The airlock door slid silently open. The body slid from the airlock as the artificial gravity of the ship lost its hold on him but his momentum kept going. Within seconds, he was out of view.

“Let’s go,” Zima said. “We have to get back to the portal. Apparently Tony surprised even Gamora and Nebula with how he got into the system, and he found some secret self-destruct option Thanos put in they didn’t know about. This whole place is going to basically disintegrate in a few minutes.”

Natasha smirked as she turned away from the stunning view of the stars through the airlock. “Good for Tony.”

“Glad he’s on our side,” Zima said as they started jogging through the twisting, intestine-like corridors.

Natasha nodded. “Loki, too.” She thought of the reports she’d gotten from Gamora about Loki’s fight with Thanos. “He’s…”

“He hides from us,” Zima said quietly. “I suspect we still don’t know exactly how much power he really has. What he can really do at full strength…”

“I trust him,” Natasha said.

“As do I.” Zima shrugged midstride. “Still.”

She nodded.

Their whole team was assembled in the room with the portal, waiting.

“The mage controlling this portal has no idea what’s going on,” Loki said without preamble. “He likely suspects something, since this force was supposed to go through at some point, but they have yet to send anyone through.”

“And it’ll lead home?” Natasha checked.

“The invasion point in Rome,” Loki said. “While with Thanos, I learned they sent a large influx of troops there, as it’s a good place to launch invasions to Europe, Northern Africa, and Asia, as well as a center of culture and tourism. We can assail the remaining Daavi from the rear. The battle was not going well for the Daavi when last we received reports, but Midgard’s armies were taking heavy losses.”

“Ideal for us, really,” Natasha said.

Loki inclined his head.

Steve looked around. “Everyone ready?”

“I can’t change again,” Bruce said, voice raspy and thin. “I’m barely awake.”

Looking at him, Natasha was surprised he was even upright. He leaned on Tony and Jane; he had bags under his eyes and an unhealthy yellow-gray cast to his skin. The curve of his back hinted at a
bone-deep exhaustion. Steve, Sharon, Wanda, Clint, and Maria also seemed worn out; makeshift bandages marked their arms and bodies, and even though they stood ready, she could tell they were tired. Ironically, Natasha and Zima had fewer wounds and weren’t as exhausted, so they’d probably be leading the charge on the Daavi rear. She supposed that was a positive. The world would see the people they’d condemned so dramatically at the forefront of the saving reinforcements.

Darcy, oddly, looked pumped. Even manic. And there was something off about her eyes, but she wasn’t close enough for Natasha to pinpoint what exactly it was. She was the only one. Loki stood next to her, just close that their arms brushed lightly against each other, and he seemed on the edge of collapse. A veneer of normalcy was in place but she could see the chaos that he normally kept hidden. She knew that when tired Loki had a much harder time controlling himself. Hopefully he’d be able to keep himself in check enough that he didn’t terrify people on Earth.

But some of the rage in him had quieted with Thanos’ death. Natasha was glad Loki had gotten some satisfaction from however he killed Thanos. She’d have to ask for the details. But later.

“You can find a quiet place to wait it out,” Steve told Bruce. “We’ll deal with it.”

“If he’s asleep, maybe someone ought to stay with him,” Maria said. “Since the UN will want to bring him in.”

Darcy looked at her carefully. “And you’re okay with us resisting that?”

Maria glanced at Natasha, then met Darcy’s eyes squarely. “Yes.”

They all knew what Darcy was really asking, and what Maria’s answer really meant.

Natasha felt a small smile tugging at her lips and squashed it. She’d hoped for this. She hadn’t wanted herself or Loki to have to kill Maria, of course, since that would be logistically and emotionally difficult, and it would cut Clint to the bone. And, slightly, for her own sake. She liked Maria, and respected the other woman’s abilities and commitment to her principles. Once they’d disliked each other as much as two people committed to getting along for the sake of a shared purpose could. Through Clint, they’d managed to make an unspoken truce. Natasha hoped to one day call Maria friend as well as ally and teammate.

Loki and Vision were the first through the portal, followed closely by Darcy. Something in Loki and Darcy’s body language told Natasha that even though they weren’t side-by-side or even touching, they were carefully in tune with the other’s motions.

Half a minute later, Darcy stuck her head back through the portal. There was a faint blood splatter up her left arm, but she didn’t seem to notice or care. “All clear.”

One by one the others began to file through.

Natasha noticed Steve and Sharon hanging back and lingered.

“What about you?” Steve said, voice low. “Are you with us or…”

“Against you?” Sharon said, amused.

Silence.

“I’m with you,” Sharon said simply.

Natasha heard Steve’s intake of breath, ready to say something else, and decided that to wait longer
would make it obvious she was eavesdropping and also rob them of well-deserved privacy, so she ducked through the depthless black of the portal on Zima’s heels.

The world dropped out from under her feet.

She hadn’t been expecting… this.

All senses disappeared. She couldn’t feel her clothes, see or smell or hear anything, couldn’t feel any part of her body. If Natasha’s self-discipline were a fraction weaker she’d have given into the fear. As it was, being so reliant on and in tune with her own physical presence, the sudden absence of all bodily sensation sparked a wave of crushing, gibbering panic.

And then it was over, and she stumbled midstride out the other side of the portal.

Vision caught her and neatly set her back on her feet. Natasha promptly doubled over, breathing as if she’d just sprinted a half mile and fighting back nausea.

“Yeah, me too,” Tony croaked, half-laughing.

When she recovered enough to look around, Natasha found four bodies shoved into a corner—three humans and one who was craggy-skinned, hooded, and unusually tall.

“The Other,” Loki said, when he caught her looking, a tightness coming into his eyes. “He was… Thanos’ lieutenant. He greatly enjoyed torturing me.”

“And I expect you enjoyed killing him,” Zima said, looking at the corpse. Its chest had been crushed into a soggy, indistinct blue-purple mess.

Loki smirked and turned away, busy catching Sharon as she fell through the portal. She thanked him, face pale, and then turned and vomited into a corner. Steve dry heaved but managed to keep the contents of his stomach down.

Wanda helped Pietro regain his feet from where he’d been slumped against the wall; Sam wiped his mouth and grimaced as he stuffed a gun taken from one of the Hydra people into his waistband. Nebula and Gamora seemed largely unaffected, standing in the corner and seeming just as uncomfortable with each other as they were with the rest of the group. Bruce had given up on staying upright and just slumped against the wall. The gray pallor of his skin had gotten more pronounced. Tony hovered over him, exceedingly unsure of what to do when it was a human who was ill and not a robot.

Zima shook his head, breathing deeply through his nose. “That was the most unsettling thing I’ve ever felt,” he murmured so only she and Steve could hear.

Natasha nodded slightly. Steve just elbowed Zima and headed for the door. “Loki, what’s on the other side?”

Loki glanced at Sharon, who was still bent over wiping at her mouth, in distaste. “Nothing, so far as I can tell.”


“Clever strategy,” Loki murmured.

Sam frowned. “How’s the battle going?”
“Not well for the Daavi,” Wanda said, looking pleased. “They’ll lose, but Thanos isn’t here with the infinity stone to finish the job.”

“Does anyone know where it went?” Gamora asked.

Loki and Wanda glanced at each other. “It disappeared,” Wanda said. “It’s the power stone. Thanos tried to hold it, but it’s not… something you can fight.”

“The stone seems to have released a massive wave of power at the moment Thanos’ control over it ended,” Loki added. “And then removed itself from the equation.” He took a breath. “I’m lowering my guard against Heimdall’s vision for a moment to alert Asgard that there is an infinity stone at play in the Realms, of unknown location, unless anyone objects.”

“They’re better left in the vaults of a regime that will refrain from using them,” Gamora said slowly. “Asgard will leave it alone?”

“Or find a safe place for it to be stored, if they can find it,” Loki said. “It’s not wise to keep more than two infinity stones at the most in one place.”

Gamora looked at Nebula, who shrugged. “I don’t particularly care,” she said.

_How do you not care where an infinity stone goes?_ Natasha appreciated Gamora’s skill set, pragmatism, and principles—she reminded Natasha a bit of Maria in that way, actually—but she was still uncertain about Nebula. For one thing, Nebula had been willing to kill Gamora, and for another, she’d been on Thanos’ side until the tides of battle turned. Natasha did not trust fair-weather allies. And if Nebula truly didn’t care who held the stone as long as it didn’t impact her, that hinted at a relentless selfishness that was more than a little concerning. Even Loki, who was by no measure altruistic, cared about the infinity stone not being in some madman’s hands. Natasha could only hope Nebula wasn’t as uncaring as she came across.

Loki rolled his shoulders. “Heimdall,” he said in a normal tone of voice, paused, and continued. “Convey word to Odin that the violet infinity stone, the power stone, was under the control of Thanos, who is now dead. The stone has disappeared and remains at an unknown location in the Realms. It would be in Asgard’s best interest to ensure that the stone doesn’t fall into the hands of anyone who plans to use it.”

He waited a moment longer. His shoulders relaxed. “My wards are back up. If I choose, I can direct his gaze elsewhere. It is done.”

“Can we go fight now?” Steve said. “There’s people here we can save.”

“Yes. Go,” Darcy said. “I’ll stay here with Bruce.”

“We’ll stay, too,” Helen added. She and Jane were still recovering from their passage through the portal. Natasha suspected it had to do in part with physical condition. Both women were fit, but far from the peak condition most of the rest of the team maintained. Darcy had handled it better, though, which maybe had to do with her magic.

Steve looked them over with a general’s eye. “Don’t let anyone try to take you for ‘questioning’ or anything. I don’t expect them to be organized enough for that, but just in case.”

“Don’t worry,” Darcy said, the manic edge to her eyes. Natasha looked closer and realized what was off—her irises had turned from hazel to purple. The same color as the infinity stone. “That won’t happen.”
Natasha believed her.

“I’ll stay with them,” Gamora said. “Nebula?”

“I’ll join the fight,” Nebula said indifferently. “The Daavi have been irritating me for months.”

Natasha resolved to watch Nebula closely. She swapped glances with Maria and Loki and knew they’d be doing the same.

Steve shifted his grip on the gun in his hand. His shield was still in the jet they flew to Berlin, since they hadn’t gone into the UN building wearing weapons and Ross had been insistent on classifying the shield as a weapon, for which Natasha couldn’t really blame him. It was still odd to see Steve without the shield, but a gun looked more natural with his new suit anyway.

“I’ll take point,” Zima said.

“Good plan,” Clint said. “Seeing as you and Tasha got the cushy job.”

Natasha whacked him on the shoulder. He grinned at her.

“You are so platonically sappy I can’t handle it,” Sam said. “Let’s go already.”

Zima smiled (actually smiled!) and shoved the door open, his pilfered alien gun up and ready.

Natasha followed him out, fingering the tooth daggers in her belt. She was still kind of hoping for a chance to use them.

Chapter End Notes

Just FYI: I originally wrote a longer and more graphic version of the torture scene in the last chapter, then toned down the one I actually posted. If any of you want to read the first draft, let me know and there’s a possibility I’ll post it at the end of the fic as an alternate version (with big bold warning text haha).

Thanks to all commenters, kudos, and readers :)}
“Wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

Thor stared back at Steve unblinkingly. “The feeling is mutual.”

Bucky tightened his grip on his alien gun and glared at Thor. Magic weapon aside, if Thor made a move he didn’t like, they were battered and bloody and exhausted after fighting their way across nine military bases in seven countries with Daavi and human corpses littering their trail, and he was going to shoot first and ask questions later.

The wind tugged at their hair and clothes as it rushed out to sea. It was evening, and the cool air felt fantastic on his battle-heated skin.

The rest of the Avengers were regrouping, slowly. They’d gotten split up in the last hour or so. Sharon, Sam, Wanda, Pietro, Tony, and Clint were over on the mainland somewhere. Natasha, Nebula, and Vision were somewhere to the north, gathering the surviving SEAL trainees and Navy people in the aftermath of the fight, as well as any alien tech they wanted to keep off the streets. Loki had been looking like death warmed over for the last three teleportations and collapsed after this one, so they’d left him in a hotel room a few blocks away, paid the owner a lot of Stark money to keep him quiet, and left to clean up the Daavi. That just left Steve, Bucky, and Tony to face off with Thor and his buddies.

The silence stretched like taffy, standing up to the rush of waves on the sand and distant sirens.

“Why’d you stay?” Tony asked finally.

Thor looked down. “I could not… could not leave Midgard defenseless. These are my companions, Fandral, Hogun, Volstagg, and Sif.”

“We made the same call,” the woman, Sif, said. She was iron through and through, that much Bucky could see easily. And in the security footage he’d seen, she had been focused on Thor in the way only someone in love homes in on the focus of their longing, but there was none of that in her now. “We dispatched the delegation of Einherjar the Allfather sent with us to capture you to protect civilian populations up and down the coast, as well.”

“You woke up on the ship?” Bucky said, frowning. He’d thought Thanos killed them all, and not wasted a second feeling sorry.

Thor made a face.

“I suspect he was attempting to strike fear into the heart of Asgard,” the dark-haired man—Hogun—said. “Or leave us as a message, or keep us alive as prizes for Loki to hunt down later. It matters not.”

“I assume he is dead?” Thor said. “Thanos, that is.”

“Not nicely,” Steve said, voice dark. Bucky almost cut his eyes sideways at his friend. He still wasn’t
used to the darkness in Steve living so close to the surface. It had always been there, he’d always known what Steve was willing to sacrifice, but when Bucky fell off the train Steve had never been pushed far enough for it to make a difference. When Bucky found them again, Steve was already somewhere in the middle, and by now it was almost all that was left inside his friend. Endless lies and betrayals and sacrifices would empty even the deepest well of nobility and altruism.

Bucky might not have been used to it, but he was really enjoying the changes.

And Tony Stark, as he stepped forward to glare at Thor, had almost none of Howard in him. Even since Bucky had met him, Tony had changed, his face getting sharper and his eyes harder. “So you had a convenient change of heart after we were taken.”

“I assure you, it was not convenient,” Fandral said drily. Bucky looked the man over and decided he matched quite well with the slender sword hanging at his waist. Quick, sharp, pretty, and lean. “We’ve committed treason for returning to Midgard. This is the second time, I might add. I doubt we’ll be pardoned again.”

“Then what changed your mind?” Steve said.

Thor heaved a sigh. “Loki.”

Beat of silence.

“Look, you might not be used to people pestering you,” Bucky said. “Being a high-and-mighty prince and all that shit. But seriously, you need to work on your explaining skills.”

Tony choked on a laugh. Bucky decided he definitely liked the son better than he ever did the father.

The mighty Thor looked mightily irritated.

“Loki turned on Midgard,” Sif said. “Odin Allfather’s opinion is that your resistance would prove futile against Thanos and he, in his rage, would destroy all of the planet instead of only some. Loki turning on you changed things. We knew his assistance would create far more chaos and damage on your world before you mortals surrendered, so we decided we had no choice but to return and fight where you could not.”

“Where we could not,” Tony scoffed. “Whose fault was that, exactly?”

“And you’re aware that Loki didn’t actually betray us, right?” Bucky added. Their reasoning sounded weak, like they were justifying having returned when they knew they shouldn’t have dragged the Avengers off planet in the first place and were trying to soothe their guilty consciences, but hell, he wasn’t complaining. The Asgardians’ help had been instrumental in ending the battle so soon and with remarkably less damage than he’d expected. Although it was still a lot of damage. And if they faced charges of treason for it, he’d just take that punishment as payback for having been stupid enough to follow stupid orders in the first place, and not feel an ounce of pity.

“We are,” Thor said. “We spoke to Romanoff some time ago.”

“She didn’t tell us that,” Tony countered.

“Her earpiece is disabled,” Thor countered.

Tony’s eyes unfocused for a second, then snapped back into place. What Bucky could see of his neck muscles where the suit’s helmet had retracted relaxed a fraction. “Nebula confirmed.”
“Nebula,” Volstagg said. “The blue one. Who is she?”

“Other victims of Thanos,” Bucky lied smoothly before Steve could open his mouth and botch everything. Darcy had given strict instructions to say no more than that to anyone, and told Gamora and Nebula that if they spoke a word of the fact that they were Thanos’ adopted daughters, she’d set them up as scapegoats for everything and turn Earth on them until they wished they’d never come anywhere near Midgard. Loki reiterated the threat, back when he’d still looked threatening because he wasn’t exhausted from teleporting the lot of them all over the globe multiple times on a nearly empty magic tank, and the message sunk home.

But it wouldn’t do to let Steve answer the question and alert the Aesir that something was off. Thor was oblivious, but Sif and Fandral had sharp eyes.

“She and the other one agreed to fight with you?” Thor said dubiously.

“Thanos wasn’t a very nice guy,” Tony said. “As you know. He made a lot of enemies. And I know you don’t think much of Midgardians, but we have this saying that goes The enemy of my enemy is my friend and I think it’s pretty apt.”

“We don’t think any less of Midgardians than we do any other race,” Volstagg protested. He actually looked offended.

Bucky scoffed. He couldn’t help it. He’d fought in Nazi Germany, he’d fought his way out of Hydra’s brainwashing, and he didn’t like this kind of oblivious elitism. “What? You don’t think of us as weak, pathetic, backwards little people, short-lived and young and incapable of doing anything for ourselves?”

A few heartbeats later, Tony snickered. “Shut your mouth, Volstagg, you’ll catch flies like that.”

“Possibly a bat,” Bucky muttered. “Looks enough like a cave, and it’s dusk…”

To his shock, Hogun and Fandral laughed aloud, and even Sif cracked a smile. Thor pressed his lips together in a pathetic and futile attempt to not show amusement.

Huh. So they weren’t always total sticks in the mud. Good to know.

“And how about now?” Steve said. “Since Loki’s plan singlehandedly let us kill Thanos, and if he hadn’t, I doubt even your hammer could’ve saved this planet.” He left out Darcy’s involvement at Darcy’s own request, Bucky knew; he certainly understood her desire to stay in the shadows and keep her armor of underestimation intact.

“With Thanos gone, you are no longer a threat to the security of Midgard in the eyes of Odin Allfather,” Fandral said. She chose her words carefully. Bucky picked through the holes in her sentence and knew she meant to imply it was all Odin’s doing to capture the Avengers, perhaps even that she and the others had disagreed all along. She had been willing to cut them loose on the ship, even when Thor hesitated.

Thor nodded. “We shall linger to aid with your realm’s recovery period and restoring stability to the areas most severely damaged. When things have quieted and we can return home, we will leave you in peace.”

“And Loki?” Tony challenged.

“I would speak with him, if he will allow it,” Thor said quietly.
“A question, if I may,” said Fandral, his manners somehow coming across as genuine despite the weird tension of this moment. Five people on one side, three on the other, all of them except one armed with powers beyond what should be possible, standing on a silent beach in the twilight while the aftermath of a battle churned nearby. Settling debts. Drawing lines in the sand. “Loki. Did you know his betrayal was false?”

“No,” Steve said. “Thanos had mages, was a mage himself. Loki couldn’t risk any of us knowing and revealing it because we didn’t have magic to defend ourselves. It was the right call.”

“Trickery,” Volstagg huffed. “Give me open battle anyway.”

Tony gave him a withering look. Bucky would never admit it, but Tony’s withering looks and angry glares were actually some of the most terrifying expressions he’d ever seen, probably because Tony was armored his flippancy ninety percent of the time and hated showing genuine emotions almost as much as Loki. “And you all wonder why Loki was so quick to turn on you.”

“Volstagg, seriously,” Bucky said nastily. “Bats.”

This time, when Volstagg shut his mouth, he glared instead of laughed. Bucky wasn’t bothered. He’d seen a lot scarier than Volstagg. Sure, the Aesir man was a fierce warrior, but come on. Loki. Thanos. Pauk. Hell, Darcy was scarier than him and she was in her twenties and wouldn’t know what to do with a sword if it presented itself to her out of a stone like she was a modern, genderbent of King Arthur. Bucky had always been warier of the cunning than the brave.

“Let’s not bicker like children,” Hogun said evenly. “There is yet work to do.”

Bucky took a breath and reined in his temper. “Sure. Okay. Go to the mainland, find Clint and Maria. They’ll put you in touch with local law enforcement and let you know where you’re needed most. We’ll handle the naval base here on the island—” it had been brutally hit; it was the center of the United States’ western navy and riddled with traitors— “and then join you.”

“We do not need to rest as frequently as Midgardians,” Thor said with a remarkable lack of condescension in his tone. “We can work longer than you. If need be, we will protect you while you rest.”

Tony quirked a brow. “Thanks, point break, but we’ve got our own guards. Handle the civilians, they need you more.”

Thor nodded. Looked down at his hands, then back up at them. “You have my sincerest apologies for capturing you and dragging you away from your Realm at its time of need. It was an honor to fight the same enemy with you once more, and I hope we can put all animosity behind us.” His eyes moved between their faces, searching. For absolution, maybe. Forgiveness. Kindness. He’d find none. Bucky trusted less easily now than he had before, which was saying something, and he knew Tony and Steve and he all trusted actions more than words. Thor’s actions were a hell of a lot louder than his words right now, and they didn’t paint a pretty picture.

But he had come back. So for now, Bucky would work with him.

He’d just be ready to dodge next time Thor and Loki were in the same room.

The Aesir began jogging away. Infuriatingly fresh and swift and graceful, even though they’d been fighting for hours. Bucky knew they hadn’t faced an insane Mad Titan from somewhere far away from the Nine Realms before joining this fight, but still.

“What now?” Tony said into the stillness.
Steve heaved a sigh, weariness seeping into his posture now that the Aesir were gone. “I don’t know.”

Bucky stepped closer to him, letting their shoulders brush. Letting Steve lean a fraction of his weight on Bucky, just like they’d always done for each other.

“You don’t always have to have a plan,” Tony said quietly.

Steve looked at him for a long moment. “…thank you.”

“Glad you appreciate it, because I’m not good at comfort and that filled my quota for like the next month,” Tony said. He was already turning away. “Let’s go collect Loki and see what the damage is.”

It wasn’t pretty.

Sitting down with General Spencer, on a video call with four other military leaders from around the world—the only people who could get a satellite uplink and enough time to sit down and talk—Steve quickly gathered that Earth’s armies were fractured worse than they’d been at any other point in history. Worse, even, than after the Second World War. Of course, they’d expected it, but standing out of sight of the camera, in the shadows with Loki and Natasha, Bucky still found himself sobered listening to the tally of the damage. Tens of millions dead, billions of dollars in property damage and lost equipment, a sudden stumble in the stride of the global economy in the wake of the damage wreaked on factories, warehouses, stores, the Internet.

Earth would recover, though. It always did.

And Tony, planted at Steve’s side wearing a designer suit and with his bruises hidden behind makeup Natasha helped him put on, looked every inch the billionaire inventor it needed to help clean things up.

“Stark Industries is already moving,” he was saying to the generals, leaving no room in his voice for argument. “We’ve got contingency plans for this kind of thing. Charity arms. We’ll be sending private security forces in to cover the gaps while you regroup, create stability, that kind of thing.”

Bucky grinned with abandon, remembering long hours spent arguing with Tony and Darcy and Maria about the practicalities of the private security arm of SI, the costs, the training methods and time, where they’d be mobilized. Tony had taken some convincing, but it was paying off now, and it was a testament to how unable the generals and admirals and presidents were able to provide stability themselves that they didn’t argue, even though they had to know the implications of letting Tony’s private and well-funded well-equipped army gain a foothold all over the world.

“We’ve already mobilized our private aircraft to airdrop food and water supplies into the areas worst hit, and we’ve got thousands of medical personnel setting up free clinics and healthcare centers and refugee posts for anyone who’s been injured or had their home damaged in the fighting.”

“And where are you going to put these people?” Spencer said, but his tone wasn’t belligerent. Just curious. And exhausted. “We don’t have room. Or the time it would take to vet everyone for refugee status in the US. Doesn’t matter where they come from.” He paused. “Then again, it’s such a chaotic mess right now you might be able to get away with it without Congress throwing a hissy fit.”

“Come on,” Tony said with a sharp grin. “We both know Congress. They’d throw a hissy fit if I so much as painted my door a different color without telling them first. I could probably ignore their hissy fit, the situation being what it is, but I’m not trying to start any extra fires here. We’re setting up refugee camps with prototype water filtration systems and power grids near every center of damage,
in any open space we can find, and before anyone gets their pants in a wad about the water and power tech that’s only now coming out, it’s all prototypes. I’m depleting my own labs for this and crossing my fingers it’ll work like it did in preliminary testing.”

“No one’s going to get mad,” Spencer said. “You’re saving our asses, Stark. Much as I hate to admit it.” He looked down and sideways, clearly scanning his own view of the others on the video call. “Does anyone disagree?”

No one did, although some were definitely less happy about it than others.

“Awesome,” Stark said. “Also, you should know that SI’s warehouses have been stocked up for years in the event of a supply shortage on materials, so we can keep pumping out equipment and energy cores for up to a year at the same rate we did before all this shit. I’m giving the official governments of this planet all a discount.” Not a big one, Bucky knew, but a discount nonetheless. Enough of a discount to ensure all the world’s governments and militaries would be eating out of Stark’s hands to replace what they’d lost in terms of non-weaponized equipment, and with the damage to so many major cities, Bucky knew they expected Stark’s energy tech to be in place all over the globe soon, since it was the quickest and most efficient way to do this. It also wasn’t really in prototype phase anymore. Tony had just been waiting for a good time to release news that he had functioning clean energy arc reactors big enough to power cities. A good time like most of those cities’ power grids being completely dark at once.

Bucky had to admire the brilliance of the plan. Darcy, Loki, Tony, and Natasha had spent hours cooking it up while the rest of them offered input where it was needed. Stark Industries was set to pull an influence coup like nothing the world had ever seen.

“Loki’s a complication,” a South African man said in a heavy accent. “As are the Avengers who were supposed to present themselves for trials after this battle.”

“As the only member of the United Nations Avengers Task Force present for this lovely little round table, I say they stay free for now,” Spencer said. Bucky was liking him more and more every time they spoke. The man was hard-faced and ruthless, but those were kind of requisite qualities for a military leader. Bucky saw them in every face on those screens. “Ambassador Ni died in the attack. Dr. Krause and Sir Stone are both missing. Ambassador Verreau is in critical condition but the doctors expect she’ll pull through. Most of the UN buildings were targeted, and the whole organization is in disarray. We’re in no position to put up an international jury for the Avengers’ supposed war crimes. They saved our asses, General Pillay. I recommend we simply leave them be.”

Tony’s phone rang.

“Oh, look at that, cell service is back up, looks like my team fixed the local towers,” he said, then glanced up at the screens. “By the way, Stark Industries has made some bargains with about seventy-four different cell service and internet providers around the globe. We fix their cell towers and we don’t pay for their use for another half century. We’ll have phones and Internet back up within a few days. Until then, stick to satellites. I hope it doesn’t inconvenience you too much.”

He waved a hand, and the screens went dark.

“Spencer seems okay,” Steve said.

“I concur.” Loki still looked terrible—there was a gray cast to his still-blue skin, purple shadows under his eyes, periodic random nosebleeds spitting blood down his shirt, and weakness in his posture—but at least he was upright and talking. “He is… not an enemy. And it could be worse. Krause and Stone were some of the most violently anti-Avengers members of that thrice-damned
“Coulson’s alive,” Natasha said. “Prescott as well. Our allies on the inside are still kicking, and as far as I can tell, still our allies.”

Tony lowered his phone from his ear. “You guys should hear this.”

The screens promptly lit up with an image of T’Challa. Bloodied, battered, and bruised, wearing some kind of black battle suit lined in a silver that Bucky recognized instantly as vibranium.

“So you are a warrior as well as a king,” Loki said, stepping into the camera field. Even his walk was so exhausted it had lost the edge of stalking, predatory grace he usually had. Bucky had never seen him like this, and he’d be acting worried if he thought Loki wouldn’t take serious offense.

“Was it my word or Stark’s you doubted?” T’Challa said evenly.

Loki shrugged. “I trust few people entirely. One day you may earn a place on that list, Highness, but I do not know you well enough at this point to come to a decision, and words can so easily be empty promises.”

“My father is dead,” T’Challa said hollowly, then got himself in hand. His voice firmed. “I am king of Wakanda now.”

Loki inclined his head just slightly. “Majesty, then. My apologies.”

“You’re not my subject,” T’Challa said. “And you’re a prince in your own right, no? Best do away with formalities here.” He looked at Tony. “And as I understand it, you’ll soon have unchallenged control the world over.”

“Not unchallenged,” Tony said. “Not the world over. But definitely more than Stark Industries had before all this. I’m sorry to hear about your father.”

“As am I,” Steve said. “I didn’t know him personally, but he seemed a good man.”

Good. Who were they to judge good these days? Bucky knew how much blood stained the hands of the people in this room, and their friends. None of them was innocent; none of them would be considered conventionally ‘good’. Not if the world knew this whole thing had been manufactured from the start, manipulated so SI would come out of it in prime position. Tony had been stockpiling for years, it was true, but he’d been careful to move his stockpiles away from population centers of late, buy and overhaul old and dated warehouses away from their predicted lines of fire. It had been an investment, but it would pay off now, since almost no one else was even prepared to keep providing what goods and services they had before, and no one had the breadth Stark could cover. No one would ever know how Thanos and Fury died.

But Bucky supposed this was something of a new world they were making. Stark Industries would be as powerful as any government if they played their cards right, and it being Darcy and Loki and Tony at the table, he trusted that the business and political cards would be played well indeed. They had a new generation of enhanced people hiding in Maine waiting to be retrieved and rehabilitated from their imprisonment. Trained. Some of them, Bucky was certain, would take up the mantle of Avengers. Some of them could be molded to carry on their legacy. In the wake of the damage, the world would become a meritocracy in short order, and Stark would be there to keep would-be petty tyrants in check. So maybe good and bad could be turned on their heads, here. Maybe it didn’t matter who was good and bad anymore. Just who won.

And they were so close to a real, complete, unassailable victory he could taste it.
“You’re the God of Chaos, among other things,” T’Challa said to Loki, eyes sharp and incisive. “Exactly how much chaos are you going to cause on Earth?”

“Chaos has two sides,” Loki said, dredging up his wolf smile from somewhere. It was tired, but still carried the don’t fuck with me edge. “Destruction, creation. Endings and opportunities. Rather like fire, really. I’ve caused plenty of destruction of late. Creation and opportunity fall in my jurisdiction as well. I would be lying if I said I was not interested in the direction Midgard takes from here.”

T’Challa paused, sizing them up.

Natasha finally stepped into view as well, so Bucky followed her lead until they were all splayed before T’Challa’s measuring stare. He was an ally; he’d helped them so far. Bucky liked the guy. He knew Steve did too, even Tony. Hopefully they could keep that trend going.

“I have called for a reason beyond informing you of my father,” T’Challa said at last. “Wakanda has been hit as well, from inside our borders as well as from without, but no Daavi nor human traitor has lived to tell the tale of what they found inside my country. I’m sure you are intelligent enough to have guessed there is far more beneath Wakanda’s surface than there seems.”

“I’d an inkling,” Tony said, voice drier than Bucky had ever heard it. He swallowed a laugh.

T’Challa nodded. “Then you should know we are in a much better position, in terms of troops, resources, and finances, than any other nation you are likely to come across. I would like to extend the terms of our alliance. Stark Industries would benefit from using our resources and we would benefit from an agreement with you if this trend of your influence expansion continues, as I and my advisors predict it will. As a gesture of good faith, I am willing to extend an invitation to all of you to use Wakanda as a base of operations for anything you do in Europe, Asia, and Africa, with the assumption that you will endeavor to keep stability and order, and minimize further deaths and petty local warlords setting themselves up in rural areas. No outsider has been granted access to Wakanda’s secrets in centuries, so I expect you to keep what you see here to yourselves. And as a good faith offering, I will inform you that my ties to the United Nations are far stronger than yours, and I have it on good authority that Darcy Lewis, Jane Foster, Dr. Helen Cho, Dr. Bruce Banner, and one Gamora have been taken custody as leverage against the trials to be those members of your team suspected of… war crimes.” His lip curled at the last, but Bucky was barely paying attention to T’Challa; he was watching Loki.

He remembered how Loki had plowed into the kitchen after talking to Maria when he thought Darcy was in trouble. Wanda had told them all how all it took was her mentioning Darcy’s name for Loki to jump into action. And Darcy had been fine then. Now? Loki was exhausted, unhinged, weak, and mentally fragile after everything that had just happened.

He was going to fly off the handle.

And indeed, the madness he’d tucked back under wraps after he came back from killing Thanos was right there below his skin. Roiling in his eyes.

Loki had his priorities, Bucky knew. Loki was one of the most relentlessly selfish people he knew, and Loki would go to any length to protect what he considered his. The Avengers were his team and family now. But Darcy was something else entirely. And Bucky hadn’t been genuinely afraid of Loki in a long time, but right now—

Right now he wasn’t going to stand in Loki’s way.

Tony, however, wasn’t that quick on the uptake. Or maybe he just didn’t care. “Loki,” he said,
stepping in the blue-skinned man’s way as Loki whirled for the exit. “Loki, stop and think.”

Loki snarled at him. Actually snarled, like a wolf. “Get out of my way, Stark.”

“You can barely walk,” Tony fired back, crossing his arms. He looked short and weak in front of Loki, even weak as Loki was. Bucky heaved an internal sigh and shifted to stand at Tony’s shoulder even though every cell in his body, even what he could feel of his prosthetic arm, was shrieking with primal fear.

Tony kept talking, rapid-fire. Trying to get it all out before his time was up. “You’ve got no magic and if you go waltzing in there we’ll have no chance of getting them back and managing to clear our names. You think Darcy would want you to wreck all that? Prove everyone on Earth right about you?”

“They are right about me,” Loki snarled. “I am not human, Stark. I am not a deity but neither am I one of you, and if I have to topple this continent beneath the seas, I will.”

“We believe you,” Steve said, voice deliberately even. Bucky recognized that tone. It was the same one Steve used when Bruce was close to hulking out in a situation where he shouldn’t. The same one he used when Bucky had still been clawing himself out of Hydra’s control in that stupid makeup store. “But can we try something less drastic first?”

Loki crossed his arms. Something in his eyes shuttered. “You may try.”

Bucky got the distinct impression that Loki was only backing off because he was pragmatic enough to know he was in no state to do any continent toppling right now. Bucky just really hoped they could come up with something before Loki really got his strength back, and got impatient. Well. Impatient er.

Tony was already turning back to T’Challa, who’d watched their little drama with an expressionless face. “Any other bombshells?”

“Ross is gathering allies,” T’Challa said at once. “An admiral from the US navy; Vice President Samson of the United States, who will shortly be sworn in as President since Caldwell’s body was found ten minutes ago; General Pillay of South Africa; some of Russia’s special forces; two battleships from China, and three more from Britain. They’re all massing in the Pacific as I speak, and they’ll be at Coronado in two days. If you refuse to turn yourselves over, Ross intends to use his hostages as leverage. If that does not work, he will go to war with you.”

“Where do you stand in all this, Your Majesty?” Natasha said smoothly.

T’Challa dipped his head just slightly. As much a gesture of respect as a monarch could afford to give, Bucky suspected. “With the Avengers, Miss Romanoff. General Pillay will find himself encountering severe difficulties moving his troops anywhere beyond his own borders, and should the Russians try to move anywhere in the skies or seas within my reach, they’ll not reach their destinations. More help than that I cannot promise. There is great instability around my country’s borders and my forces will be occupied restoring some semblance of peace to the region.”

“Fair enough,” Steve said. “We appreciate the help. And the warning.”

Tony grinned at T’Challa. “Looks like we’re at the beginning of a very beneficial friendship.”

“Oh, indeed,” T’Challa said with a return smile. “I would greatly enjoy asking questions about your arc reactor technology, and answering questions in return. My own scientists have not been able to successfully reverse engineer the reactor.”
Bucky resolved to keep a very close eye on T’Challa and Tony the next time they officially met. T’Challa had that same mad science gleam in his eye that Tony got sometimes, for all he was a king and a general and a soldier. Tony had caused plenty of explosions doing crazy science on his own. He didn’t need more help. Bruce didn’t count, seeing as he wasn’t an engineer.

“We must go,” Loki said, looking up suddenly. “Thor approaches. He and the other Aesir should not be informed of this,” he added. “They’d advise us to simply turn ourselves in. Perhaps not me, though; I do not know if they have another set of chains to bind me with.”

“I’ll not breathe a word of it,” T’Challa said. “Farewell for now.”

He hung up before they could reply.

“Oh, this is just fucking fantastic,” Tony said, a gleam in his eye.

“You’ll be at the head of an empire,” Steve told him. “An empire that spans the globe. That could ruin hundreds of millions of lives.”

“Good thing I’ve grown up some,” Tony said.

“Oh, plenty,” Steve agreed. “Otherwise I’d never have let this happen. And we’ll be here to help you keep everything straight. Pick up the slack when you disappear into your workshop for a few days and forget the world exists.”

Natasha grinned. “Because we’re so trustworthy with the world in our hands.”

“I’m fairly sure we can do a better job than Ross and the UN,” Bucky muttered.

Footsteps rang outside the room they’d commandeered in the naval base.

The door burst open, and Thor stepped through, flanked again by Fandral and Sif. The other two, this time, were nowhere in sight.

If it came to violence, Bucky liked these odds much better.

Thor’s eyes went right to Loki, who did not move. Fandral let out a choked, aborted gasp of shock when he saw Loki’s blue skin and the markings tracing along it, but Thor didn’t flinch.

“The city has been stabilized to some extent,” Sif said, addressing the rest of them while Thor and Loki continued their staring contest. “The fires have all been extinguished. Emergency workers are digging through the rubble. Volstagg and Hogun remain with them. Two hospitals were targeted by Daavi troops but they have been reopened, in large part thanks to emergency responders wearing Stark Industries gear. We shall aid the rescue efforts here on the island while you sleep.”

Steve shifted his feet and glared, probably ready to turn down the offer of help.

“We would appreciate the assistance,” Natasha said, stepping forward and laying a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “I can meet you out front in a few minutes and tell you in more detail what areas have been searched the least.”

A knowing grin tugged at Sif’s lips. She half-bowed. “As you wish. Let us depart.”

“I would speak with you, Loki,” Thor said. “In private.”

Bucky saw Loki’s jaw clench as it often did when he was biting back cruel words.
Thor took a breath. “Please.”

“Fine,” Loki gritted out. “Come with me.”

He stalked out of the room without a backwards glance. Sif and Fandral got out of his way, probably a smart move, and Thor was so taken aback by the sudden movement that he paused and had to jog after Loki with a hurried apology to his friends.

Sif shook her head, grabbed Fandral, and dragged him away.

As soon as they were out of sight, Steve snapped, “Why did you agree to that?”

“Hey,” Bucky warned.

“You’re dead on your feet,” Natasha said, turning away. It was a calculated move to defuse the challenge in Steve’s posture. He was tired and grouchy and looking for a fight. “You’re in no condition to keep moving blocks of concrete and shouting orders. If your voice goes more than a few decibels over normal inside volume, it cuts out. We all need rest, especially you and Loki and you, Tony, don’t go sneaking off.”

Tony froze in the doorway.

Bucky laughed.

“So we are going to go find a hotel as soon as Loki comes back from his family reunion, give the Navy their base back, and sleep for seven hours before we come back to keep helping. Clint’s already making the others do the same. With the exception of Vision, because he doesn’t sleep.”

Steve exhaled, the tension seeping from his shoulders. “Sorry. I just… I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap.”

“I know,” Natasha said, grinning at him over her shoulder as she headed for the door. “We’re all tired. Let’s just go rest.”

Steve nodded.
Chapter 187

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

US Naval Base, Coronado Island, San Diego, California, United States

May 2012

Loki stepped into a small conference room down the hall, still not accustomed to the blue shade of his skin in his peripheral vision, and turned to face Thor.

His adopted brother stepped inside, doing a quick and ingrained soldier’s environmental examination as he shut the door. He faced Loki and hesitated.

“You said you wished to speak with me,” Loki said flatly. “As you can see, I’m in need of rest. Either say what you wish, or be gone.”

Thor scowled. “Must it always be like this between us? Must it always be a fight?”

Loki didn’t bother to respond.

“Loki, I…” Thor blew out a heavy breath. “Can you tell me why?”

“Be more specific,” Loki said coldly.

“Why… everything!” Thor waved an arm wildly. Thankfully, it was not the one holding Mjolnir. “Why did you ruin my coronation? Why did you usurp the throne? Why did you let yourself fall from the Bifrost? Why did you not tell me Thanos invaded your mind? Why did you say you didn’t want Asgard’s throne? Why… why won’t you come home?”

“Sometimes I forget how great a fool you can be,” Loki said mockingly. “Consider how you treated me, Thor. I loved you as a brother.” Letting the words pour out of him felt rather like lancing an untreated wound, and his self-control was weakened by exhaustion. Darcy, Darcy, Darcy pounded through his head every second and left him loose-tongued and distracted. And this was Thor. Even after everything, he got under Loki’s skin, shattered his foundations and left him reeling, a weakness for which Loki despised both of them. His tone grew more vicious with every word and he didn’t even try to curb himself. “And every time I ventured an opinion, every time I tried to assist you in any way, you behaved as if my views didn’t matter and my counsel was worthless. You were an arrogant fool, blind to the perspectives of anyone but your fellow warrior-nobles, convinced that the mark of a great king is leading armies in battle and hosting great feasts. You’d have run Asgard’s treasury dry in a century at the outside, and driven our foreign relations to ruin. I never intended for us to get to Jotunheim, or for you to be banished.”

“You tried to destroy Jotunheim,” Thor said intensely. “An entire realm.”

“It’s no more than you always swore you’d do,” Loki said, stepping forward, feeling scars old and new twist and catch, relishing the pain, as dark emotions tugged on his face. He watched Thor notice the wounds and flinch slightly, and it was more satisfying than Loki would’ve expected. Hunt down the monsters and slay them all, do you not remember? And then I found out I was one of the monsters, that there was a reason Odin always favored you. I was half out of my mind, desperate, willing to go to any length to convince you I wasn’t a monster.”
Thor looked gutted.

Loki couldn’t find it in himself to regret the pain his words were causing. Especially not when he was expending so much effort to not think about the fact that these foolish Midgardian authorities had taken Darcy, because if he thought of that for more than a few seconds at a time—

Loki refocused on Thor with an effort.

“I never knew… that you felt that way,” Thor said quietly. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“That’s the worst of it,” Loki said with a bitter laugh. “You never paid enough attention to me to notice. You took it for granted that I’d stand at your shoulder and clean up your messes.”

“Plenty of those messes were made by your tricks,” Thor said. “You were the cause of countless scoldings delivered to both of us as children.”

“And I was there at every turn to talk us out of trouble,” Loki snapped. He wanted to hurt Thor, and experience told him a physical fight Wouldn’t do that, no matter how much he wanted to. Even if he was victorious, Thor was accustomed to the pain of battle wounds. Loki could learn from his failures. “Or have you forgotten that as well?”

Thor couldn’t seem to hold his gaze.

Satisfaction combined with a bottomless hunger for more of this—more of Thor hurting, more of this opportunity to finally make him listen, and became something toxic and cruel. Loki checked himself more for the sake of maintaining his self-discipline than anything else. He wasn’t opposed to indulging his destructive instincts, but he tried to do so only when there was a purpose, and he’d satisfied that purpose now. After so many hours in battle, so much overextension of his seidr and his body, restraining himself was an active effort.

But he accomplished it, if for no other reason than to prove to himself that he could. It was a small victory but a necessary one. Loki was not so far unmoored by his adoptive brother’s presence that he lost control of himself entirely.

“What will you do now?” Thor said.

A sneer tugged at his lips in response to the blatant change of subject. “My actions are no concern of yours.”

“They are if I am to have any hope of convincing F—the Allfather to leave you to your self-imposed exile on Midgard.”

Loki froze for a half second. Brief, but Thor caught the hesitation. Loki glared at him.

“I seem to recall you requesting the honor of swinging the blade should that bloated old imbecile sentence me to death,” he said, almost smiling at the way Thor visibly checked his reaction to the insult. “And now you wish to argue my case?”

Thor took a deep breath, clearly reaching for control. Loki did not miss the way his grip on Mjolnir tightened and subtly summoned knives to the sheaths on his forearms. “I thought you driven mad by your fall through the void,” Thor said. “And that… it would be cowardly to let the task fall to anyone else.

So Thanos had been telling the truth about that as well. Loki didn’t let Thor see exactly how much that hurt, somewhat furious with himself for still caring enough that Thor could hurt him.
“Such a noble man you are,” Loki sneered.

“It’s not my place to make that judgment.”

“Say it is.”

Thor shook his head, mutely.

“Yet you’d have done it anyway. Simply because the Allfather judged it the day of my demise. You must have thought it likely, if you had to make such a request.”

“He is my king, Loki,” Thor said angrily. Or desperately. Loki couldn’t tell the difference anymore. His thoughts were scattered, his emotions raging. Darcy Darcy Darcy screamed his mind. Kill the oaf, go find her, burn a city so they will never again dare to touch what is yours.

He let a knife slip down into his hand, blade first, and clenched his fingers around the blade. Pure, clean pain sliced through the destructive thoughts and helped him focus.

“He is a king,” Loki said. “And he may be your king. But that does not make him a good one, and I will subjugate myself to him no longer. For the foreseeable future, I intend to remain on Midgard. If he asks why, tell him it is because I found a family here that never taught me to hate myself, and fear that my brother would kill me, simply for the realm I came from.”

He turned to go.

“Loki.”

Thor’s voice was soft. Almost pleading. Loki glanced over his shoulder and met those guileless blue eyes.

“Is there any chance of reconciliation between us?” Thor asked.

Loki stared at him. He hadn’t expected this. “You dare even ask?”

Thor looked away.

“I told you once that I have no need for companionship,” Loki said, thinking back to a day many centuries gone, before he realized they’d become so alienated that he couldn’t conceive how to repair the damage, when Thor tried to speak to him about his lack of friends. Somewhere inside himself Loki had known, then, that Thor cared and was trying, and he saw it clearly from his adult perspective too. Loki had learned to accept assistance both emotional and physical from the other Avengers. Thor, though, then as now—he’d die before he admitted needing Thor for anything. “It was only partly true. But forgiveness is truly absent from my nature. You should know me better than to ask for it as if it’s a bit of old parchment to be bandied about.”

“Perhaps one day?” Thor said. “Perhaps one day it might be possible? That is all I ask.”

Afraid. Worried. Hopeful. Desperate. Furious. All of those things, or maybe none. Loki couldn’t read him and didn’t want to. He was exhausted. By everything. Battle, worry, restraining himself, Thor’s presence, this entire painful conversation.

And maybe it was only exhaustion, maybe it was only that Loki was suddenly and sharply desperate to escape this room and this person who still had far too strong a hold on him, but he gave Thor a short, jerky nod.
That was definitely hope.

Thor’s shoulders relaxed a tiny fraction. “Thank you,” he said, and looked like he was going to say something else, but something about Loki’s posture or eyes must have warned him that Loki’s control was fraying, because he simply shifted Mjolnir uncomfortably and left.

Loki didn’t remember the last time Thor had thanked him for anything.

It was only after the door had been closed for several minutes that Loki opened his hand and let blood from his cut drip to the floor. Long after the wound had sealed and the knife had been sent back to its interdimensional storage space, he stood there, watching blood dry from vivid red to burgundy-brown against his blue Jotun skin.

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone! I am SO sorry for the unexpected hiatus! I just started college and everything is crazy. I'm having a fantastic time so far but my free time to write is down to about nil. Not sure what my update schedule is going to be like from now on and I'll respond to all the comments I've gotten in the last few days (week? i don't even know anymore) when I get a chance. I promise I'm not ignoring you on purpose! And I'm definitely not abandoning this story; it will definitely be finished, and pretty soon. I'm just not sure *how* soon. Thanks for reading and/or commenting and/or kudos!
Chapter 188

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Mariott Hotel, Berlin, Germany

May 2012

“I can’t believe this.”

Darcy didn’t look up. “I can.”

Jane scowled at her friend, unable to fathom how Darcy was staying so calm. “We are on house arrest in a hotel in Berlin, less than twenty-four hours after we came back from a city in space where we fought an alien who wanted to use a singularity compressed into matter to destroy half of our species, and now our government is treating us like the villains and locking us up, and you’re just sitting there?”

Darcy raised an eyebrow and finally looked up from her laptop. At least she’d been allowed that much, although there was some kind of stranglehold on the wifi that kept her from doing anything that would contact the rest of the team. “You done?”

Jane took a deep breath. “Yeah. Done.”

“Okay good, because I just got a message from Tony.” Darcy swiveled the laptop. “Seriously. These idiots thought they could keep Tony away even though they gave me wifi access and a computer. I mean, I think Vision and Natasha helped, but still. Dumbasses.”

Helen stuck her head out into the living room of their hotel suite. She’d been checking on Bruce, who was still out cold. “Did I just hear what I think I heard?”

“Yup,” Darcy said, beckoning.

Helen came out immediately, still tugging a shirt on over her head. Jane caught a glimpse of her flat stomach and practical black bra and bit her lip, looking away. “What’s it say? And how do you know there aren’t listening devices in here?”

Darcy twiddled her fingers, and purple light gleamed between them.

“Right,” Helen said.

Gamora frowned. She’d been sitting rock still across the coffee table from Darcy for an hour and frankly creeping Jane out. “You are a mage?”

Darcy gave her a look that said obviously and flicked the back of her laptop screen. “Tony says they’re implementing stage two of the plan a little earlier than expected. Apparently, Bruce, Natasha, Steve, Wanda, Sam, and Clint refused to turn themselves in for their “trials” and Ross threw a hissy fit.” She snickered. “He’s sending a force of troops to fight them. Not UN troops, though, because the entire United Nations is in disarray and most of their military might is tied up trying to keep the peace all over the world. He’s got a general from South Africa backing him, some guys from Russia and China, lots of soldiers from the US who’re under command of some guy named Josh Carry that Ross mentored. He wanted to use us as leverage but apparently Coulson, Prescott, and T’Challa are
working against him from inside the UN and they can’t get us out but they managed to stop the UN people here from turning us over to Ross.”

Helen frowned. “Have they fought already?”

“No.” Darcy flipped the laptop back around to herself and kept typing. “Secure chatbox,” she explained absently. “I wrote a little worm—well, technically, used a worm I keep as an innocuous file online that looks like a JPEG—and this looks like I’m just browsing the Nordstrom shoe website.”

Helen looked startled. “You wrote that program?”

“Hell no,” Darcy said, grinning at them over the top of her laptop. “I stole it from this programming major in college, along with a bunch of other useful bits of code. He was a jackass, liked to cheat on tests and then blame other people so he ended up at the top of the curve. I was getting a little payback… here we go. Tony says they’re facing off with Ross’ little rogue army sometime tomorrow; Natasha and Bucky are going through this afternoon to poison all the food stores and assassinate some of the officers if they can, so it’ll be a rough day, and then Loki’s gonna teleport everyone right to the middle of camp in the middle of the night.”

Gamora looked, to Jane, impressed. Maybe. It was hard to tell. She was exceedingly difficult to read.

“It’s a clever plan,” she said. So impressed, then. “Whose?”

“Eh… joint effort, sounds like.” Darcy was typing, probably a reply. “I’d guess Loki, Sam, Steve, Bucky… Clint and Maria, maybe. They’re the team members with military experience, not just operating on their own.”

“You are more formidable foes than I originally judged you,” Gamora said.

Helen cocked her head, the motion birdlike. “Is that why you betrayed your father?”

Even Darcy paused her typing to hear this answer. Jane was curious, too, though she’d never have asked, since she wasn’t sure how to say it. They hadn’t had this conversation yet. Gamora had spent seven hours pacing and then nine hours sleeping and then another two pacing again, and none of them had dared talk to her.

“No,” Gamora said flatly. “I betrayed him because he was cruel, manipulative, destructive, and insane.”

Darcy went back to typing. “Sounds legit.”

“Not because he was a bad father?” Helen muttered.

Jane looked at her with mild concern. That sounded bitter. Helen had been tight-lipped about her family, and in the midst of all this chaos, they’d had time to go on one lunch date. Not exactly the best time for a tentative romance to develop.


“She’s not your biological sister,” Jane said. “Is she?”

“No. Neither of us knows who our true parents are, or where we come from. All we remember is Thanos.” Gamora said it evenly, as a fact. Jane didn’t know how she was so emotionless about this. Or maybe she wasn’t emotionless and Jane just couldn’t pick up on it.
She tapped her fingers on the edge of the sofa, needing something to do with her mind. Numbers, a scientific journal, something. But the UN had been even more restrictive on the access to science and tech stuff for Jane and Helen than they had been about giving Darcy Internet—more fool them—and there was nothing in the hotel room slash prison to do with Jane or Helen’s interests. Except coffee. Jane loved coffee. She’d had four cups today, and her stomach churned with the unsettled caffeine buzz she remembered so well from late nights alone in the lab with her data.

Darcy flinched suddenly, and Jane refocused.

“Loki just contacted me,” she said, eyes glazing slightly.

Gamora leaned forward. “How—”

“Shh,” Jane said, tapping her temple.

“Oh,” Gamora murmured, and returned to her perfectly still pose.

Jane looked at Helen and knew they were thinking the same thing. Creepy.

Darcy snorted.

Jane glanced at her, but the glazed look that meant she was talking to Loki in her head was still there.

“Loki’s coming for us as soon as he’s gotten the others into the camp,” Darcy said, eyes refocusing. “So be ready to go.”

Jane unconsciously increased the tempo of her finger tapping. This… she wasn’t fully sure about this. Fighting soldiers from Earth. Going rogue. It was tantalizing, and thrilling, but part of her wondered if they were reaching too far. If they should just take what they could get.

She blinked and realized Darcy and Gamora had left the suite, returning to their respective bedrooms sometime while Jane was spacing out. There were seven separate bedrooms, two living rooms, and a kitchen in the suite; it was some kind of VIP deal, but the UN had commandeered the entire building for “holding important persons on suspicion of criminal activity”. Code for “our building got destroyed and we’re keeping them but we don’t know where else to put them or what we’re going to do with them”.

“Jane,” Helen said.

Jane blinked and looked at her—girlfriend? Could she say that?

“Are we dating?” she blurted. “As in, call each other our girlfriend dating?”

Helen smiled the way she did when she was trying to hide exactly how happy she was. Jane wondered when exactly she’d gotten so good at reading Helen’s different smiles. There was the condescending smile, the you’re-an-idiot smile, the you’re-a-dork-and-it’s-hilarious smile, the amused smile, the judging you smile, the bitch please smile, the innocent smile, the laughing smile, and then this, small and sharp and curled in at the corners but shining with happiness, like a secret only meant for those who knew her well enough to see it. “Do you want to be?”

Jane bit her lip and nodded.

“Okay,” Helen said, and it was as simple as that.

Jane nodded. Lapsed back into silence.
“We never got a chance to really talk about this,” Helen said quietly. “The Avengers just saying *fuck off* to everyone else’s rules and… doing their own thing.”

“Our own thing,” Jane corrected her. “And… I… oh my God.”

Helen blinked at her. “What?”

“I just realized…” Jane started laughing with disbelief. “So I was thinking. I’ve *been* thinking. This seems… risky. Drastic. You know? People don’t get what they want like this, people need to compromise, et cetera. We should settle and make some kind of deal. But you know what?” She turned to face Helen, a smile splitting her own face because even when it was a self-analysis thing and not scientific, Jane loved epiphanies more than most other nouns. “That’s my parents talking, telling me to settle, find a man, find a career that provides more stabilization and income than astrophysics, *settle down, Jane, you can’t chase your dreams forever*. Blech.” She shook her head.

“Didn’t I meet them at that one awards ceremony?” Helen said. “And your dad asked you when you were going to switch your major back to accounting?”

“Don’t remind me,” Jane said with a shudder.

“They sound… charming.”

“They’re not. I mean, I love them, I still go home for holidays about half the time, but come on.” Jane rolled her eyes. “I don’t know… I supported the team because it makes sense? To do this. But if you don’t want to…”

She didn’t know what would happen then. Darcy, her best friend, and Tony and Bruce and Wanda and maybe one day Maria and Sharon, her new friends, *family*, and her science, versus Helen.

“I want to,” Helen said. “I was just curious what *you* were thinking.”

Jane leaned back on the sofa, feeling the restlessness drain out of her limbs slightly for the first time since the UN had found them in their basement in Rome and frog marched them up to the airport, Gamora carrying Bruce and hissing at anyone who tried to touch him. “Good to know we’re on the same page.”

“Indeed,” Helen said, leaning back also and turning on her side so they were facing each other, only inches apart, both grinning.

“Why?” Jane said. “What’s your reasoning?”

Helen considered. “I like all of you. I think your morals align more closely with my own than any other group of people I’ve come across. I like working with you and Tony and Bruce in the lab. I like the idea of helping you. I like the resources Stark Industries provides, and the access I’ll have, and the ability to manufacture and sell and improve on the cradle. I think there are a lot of very logical arguments as to why the Avengers should remain independent of any one government. And I don’t want to give you a complex between me, running off to the UN to snitch, versus Darcy and the opportunities SI gives *you*.”

Jane leaned forward and kissed her.

It startled even Jane, a little bit. She hadn’t been planning to kiss Helen. It just sort of happened. But Jane supposed, in the brief second she had before her thoughts quieted for the first time she could remember, that the best sort of kiss was the kind that went unplanned.
It was soft, and light, and both of them were a bit reluctant to pull away.

“What was that for?” Helen breathed into the tiny space between them.

Jane regathered her scattered thoughts. “I like you.”

She felt more than saw Helen’s smile. At this distance, it was hard to focus on anything except the liquid brown of her eyes. “I like you, too.”

Jane held out her hand, feeling brave and loose and proud of herself, and Helen took it without hesitation.

Chapter End Notes

Full disclosure: I know this one is short but it was one of my favorite scenes to write and reread of this entire thing.

College is great so far, there's a guy and he is causing some Drama but my classes are great so that's good. Updates will probably be more or less once a week from here on out. I'm almost done. I looked at my outline when i was writing last night and though "Holy shit, there's not much left". !!!!!!!!
Chapter 189

[Classified Location], Nevada, United States

May 2012

“Do we seriously have to do this?” Pietro muttered.

Loki, back to his human skin tone, glared at him. He had very little patience today—too much of him was preoccupied with keeping his feet on the ground long enough to teleport the whole team into the army base before he went after Darcy—and certainly not enough for these incessant questions.

Pietro rolled his eyes. “Don’t look at me like that, it was just a question.”

“Second thoughts?” Clint asked, leaning on the Quinjet next to them.

“No,” Pietro said. “I only wanted more sleep first.”

At that, Sam’s laugh bounced off the edge of the jet and ran off into the desert around them. They’d landed and cloaked themselves half an hour’s flight from the edge of the army Ross had spent the last two days gathering, waiting for midnight before Loki teleported in. It was pitch black all around them, and the chill was biting into the human team members enough that most of them had activated the heating coils of Tony’s new suit tech. Loki stuck to his simple long-sleeve black shirt, lightweight enchanted armor, and cargo pants.

A corner of Loki’s mind was focused on the hair-thin connection he maintained with Darcy. Knowing she was unhurt, that the UN had been too busy trying to regroup and manage catastrophes around the world in the wake of the attacks and deal with internal power struggles to bother doing anything except send irregular meals to the hotel room, was the only reason he’d managed to keep himself from throwing their plans to the wind and teleporting to her side. That, and the knowledge that he really needed to rest and regain some of his depleted seidr stores before he went after her, because he wasn’t going to just spirit them both away. He was going to make them pay for taking her. And for that, he needed power.

He’d woken up at least once last night and three times the night before that, reaching across the uncomfortable mattress for someone who wasn’t there. But, tactically, taking her first would play their hand. He couldn’t. Shouldn’t.

Staying put was one of the hardest things Loki had ever done, but he managed, if only by repeating to himself all the reasons it was necessary to leave his—his Darcy in enemy hands, and when that failed, picturing the havoc he would wreak as vengeance.

How are you? he asked silently.

Her response was almost immediate. Bored out of my goddamn mind, but fine. I can’t spend too much time sneaking around the wifi restrictions or they might notice. I’ve literally spent half an hour trying to make the grossest thing I can with the condiments in the fridge. I’m gonna try to convince Gamora it’s an Earth drink and she should try it.

Darcy’s humor loosened something Loki hadn’t known was tense. He felt a smile curving his mouth. I wish you good fortune in that endeavor.

Thanks, probably gonna need it. How’re things on your end?
Well, Natasha and James managed reach all the food stores two nights ago, and eleven of the officers are dead. The army is restless. They know we are in the area, but not precisely where. He let a bit of his own amusement and satisfaction curl down the connection to her. They keep sending out patrols, both aerial and on the ground. Few return.

Sounds like you’re having fun.

Oh, absolutely. And I’m going to enjoy myself even more when I come for you.

Her response was nonverbal, just a strong sense of agreement.

“Five to midnight,” Steve said quietly into the darkness.

It’s time. Be ready.

See you soon, Darcy replied, and then Loki regretfully cut down the strength of the connection until it was once again thin as a wire. He’d know if she felt any sudden surges of fear or pain or worry, but most of her thoughts and emotions remained out of reach. It was an unnecessary power expenditure but it brought both of them significant comfort, so Loki was loathe to let it go completely.

Steve jumped down off the wing of the Quinjet. Sam followed him down at a slower pace, grumbling something about superheroes and enhanced people.

James leaped off right as Sam’s feet touched the ground, landing in a crouch and standing up with an excessively innocent expression. “What was that?” he asked.

“Oh, fuck you,” Sam said.

James grinned.

Loki was really starting to like him.

Vision, Natasha, and Clint exited the jet silently. Maria, Tony, Sharon, Pietro, and Wanda exited much less silently. Loki found nothing but determination in their faces. Maria made a point of glaring at him, clearly aware he was evaluating their commitment and none too pleased about it. He simply smirked at her and turned away.

For a moment, they stood in a loose cluster near the Quinjet’s lowered ramp, not speaking. Cold desert wind gusted, tugging at clothes and hair. The chill reminded Loki, perhaps inevitably, of his Jotun heritage now, and cold weather tugged at his magic, beckoned him to change his shape from Aesir to Jotun. He ignored the temptation. He still wasn’t comfortable enough with… that part of himself to just change at random. And perhaps he never would be.

Though he could imagine it might be pleasant to walk as a Jotun through one of Midgard’s winter forests. Alone. Disguised from Heimdall and everyone else.

He shook off the contemplation with an irritated huff. This was not the time for introspective self analyses. Darcy was being held by the United Nations, along with Bruce and Helen and Jane, who were family, and Gamora, who if nothing else could not be left to the UN to study. Loki’s team needed him.

Wanda was the first to speak. “Thanos is dead, but it does not feel like we’ve won.”
“Not yet,” Steve said with quiet conviction.

“We haven’t won,” Sam pointed out. “Seeing as we still have plenty of enemies.”

Clint grinned, swinging his bow around his hand. This was a modified version, a prototype that had been stored in the jet. It could shift back and forth between a bow and a bladed staff. Loki had to admire Tony’s ingenuity. “Only for the next couple hours.”

Darcy Darcy Darcy

“It’s time,” Loki said, allowing no argument. He would wait no longer. “Brace yourselves.” He paused, then added, “This will be a proper portal, not mere teleportation. I recommend you hold your breaths.”

Steve and Sharon both looked distinctly greenish at the thought of worldwalking again, but neither of them protested.

Loki began drawing runes in the air to hold the spell in place, whispering under his breath. His seidr came when he called, rippling in his fingertips and streaming bright from his well of power. He still wasn’t back at full strength, but two days of rest had served him well, and he had adequate strength for what he had to do today.

It took less than a minute for the portal spell to be completed. Runes flared to life and Loki relished the feeling of magic at his beck and call. He’d forgotten to appreciate it. This. The heady delight that came with harnessing raw magic, which was at its heart nothing but chaos, and shaping it to his will. The energy of the universe channeled through his body, shaped by his mind, affecting the world. But having been so weakened, so close to death and so thoroughly drained, had reminded him how precious was his gift.

No more will I take it for granted.

Loki supposed such realizations were a common side effect of nearly dying.

Vision was first through, since the mind stone gave him both a resistance to the effects of worldwalking and a powerful defense to clear the way. Wanda followed him through, red energy already gleaming around her hands and burning in her eyes. Pietro tossed Loki a cocky grin and zipped through on his sister’s heels; Loki could feel the quicksilver flood of his ability lingering in the air for several seconds after Pietro was gone.

Then Steve. Sharon. Tony, his armor restored to him, eyes glowing with wicked blue light. Clint and Natasha, Sam and Maria and James, with resolution in their eyes and weapons held with casual competence.

Loki stepped through the portal, neatly gathering the ties binding it to him and closing it behind him, rather like running past a clothesline and yanking a sheet down on the way.

He emerged onto a battlefield.

Explosions and gunshots already streaked across the darkened army encampment. There was Iron Man, roaring through the sky and exchanging blasts with two jets. Steve and Bucky fought side-by-side, with Sam soaring overhead. Maria and Clint and Natasha had already vanished—likely taking advantage of the confusion to slip away. He could feel Pietro somewhere to his right, and Wanda was dueling an entire poorly organized squadron while Vision shot skyward to aid Tony. The Midgardian military people were shouting, screaming, fighting back but exceedingly poorly.
Loki drank in the chaos, let it feed him. Their surprise attack had come as a complete surprise. Evidently no one planned for the possibility of their enemies simply appearing in the heart of their camp while they slept. This was his element. He wanted to join the fray, knives in hand and a smile on his face, to perform the battle-dance in perfect time.

But his teammates hardly needed his help, and he had more mayhem to create tonight.

Loki caught a glimpse of his reflection in the hull of a tank as it rumbled by, seconds before Vision blew it up. The flames washed toward him, burning bright, and Loki stepped into the void a half second before they reached him, the image of his own gleaming eyes lingering in his mind’s eye.

He looked healthier already.

The darkness between worlds twisted around him, and he found the connection between himself and Darcy and let it guide him from one point to another, and then light and sound and sensation returned and he landed lightly on the floor at the foot of her bed.

Darcy looked up instantly. She’d been sitting, cross-legged and fully clothed, on top of unrumpled sheets. Waiting.

“Loki,” she said, and he wasn’t sure who moved first but they were holding each other and he buried his head in her hair where her neck and shoulder met, eyes closed.

Something in him quieted.

“I shall enact payment from them for this,” he breathed.

Darcy smiled against his chest. “I’m gonna help.”

“I would expect nothing less,” he said.

And then she shifted, and he started truly paying attention, and realized there was a strange play of energy across her skin where it touched his.

Darcy pulled back before he could examine the sensation more closely.

He met her eyes and narrowed his own. “Darcy, are your eyes… purple?”

“Um. Maybe.”

It was not difficult to put the pieces together. “The infinity stone.”

“I don’t know where it is, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“But it did not leave you unaffected.”

“…no.”

Fascinating. In some accounts, the infinity stones were semi-sentient, a theory which seemed supported by the mind stone’s seeming willingness to simply let Vision use it as he chose. The power stone—it had been taken from Thanos by Vision’s sacrifice, and the power stone rebelled against his grasp when Thanos tried to hold it. When Thanos tried to break one of the few fundamental laws to which the stones were bound.

And as its power dissipated, as the stone disappeared, it left something behind. Much as the mind stone had integrated fragments of its power with the Maximoff twins, warped the very fabric of their
bodies and minds to give them abilities independent of its own power source, the power stone had altered Darcy.

Loki knew Darcy could see and feel the pounding mix of excitement and worry in his heart.
“Enhanced,” he said. “You’re enhanced.” He’d never have coined the term himself—warped would be how an Asgardian would likely describe a mortal touched by an infinity stone—but he found himself rather fond of it.

Darcy had been extraordinary to begin with. He was suddenly and wildly curious about what exactly she had become with some of an infinity stone’s power resting in her.

“I’m honestly not sure yet,” she said.

He cocked his head, a smirk tugging at his lips. It felt better, even, than he’d expected to be back in her presence. Never mind that they were in the heart of an enemy stronghold and he’d expended much of the power he’d regained voidwalking the Avengers and then teleporting himself. They were together, and even though, logically, having her with him in this situation shouldn’t have put him so much at ease—she was not combat trained—he was immensely relieved just to have his Darcy at his side. “Mind reading?”

“No,” she said, grinning. “I just know you. And, for once, you’re pretty transparent. I’ll have to remember that shock makes you easy to read.”

“I doubt you’ll be able to shock me quite this much again,” Loki said, leaning down and letting his lips graze her ear, smirking wider when a distinct shiver ran down her spine. “It’s not every day you get the opportunity to steal power from an infinity stone.”

“I didn’t steal it,” Darcy said. “I… felt it. Washing over me. Taking an interest in me.”

“It’s the power stone,” Loki mused. “There are different types of power. Thanos was most interested in the brute force variety, which is what the stone provided him. You value something quite different.”

“Sneaky power,” Darcy said.

“Pietro wanted to be faster than everyone else,” Loki said, thinking out loud. He didn’t care that they didn’t really have time for this. “Fast enough to outrun everything. Wanda wanted to make the people who’d hurt her family hurt as she had—to see what others fear, to be strong enough to take her vengeance. So the mind stone gave them what was in its power to give. Their abilities were shaped by their most base desires.” He brushed a thumb over Darcy’s jaw, enjoying the slight hitch in her breath. The new violet shade to her eyes was slightly unnerving, in a delicious way, and the edge to her power crackled in her skin in a way no one but a mage would detect. He imagined how that would feel when they had sex and knew his eyes were darkening with desire, saw hers do the same.

Darcy sucked in a breath and looked away. “Later.”

“Oh yes,” he said, and brushed his lips over the skin behind her ear, and stepped away while he still had the willpower to do so.

“Power stone…” Darcy mused. “I’m not any stronger a mage, I tested that.”

“It changed your seidr,” Loki said. “You may not be able to cast any greater spell than you could before, but I suspect you have other gifts now. The infinity stones are powered by an energy that is similar to, yet discrete from, seidr.”
“Weak mage and enhanced mortal,” Darcy said. “I wonder if my power is making coffee out of thin air.”

Loki barked out a surprised laugh. “That pathetic beverage mortals consider a stimulant?”

“Hey, don’t diss caffeine,” Darcy said. “It saved my ass in college. Fueled like eight A papers written overnight. I could get a lot of power by whipping coffee out of nowhere.” She made a grabbing gesture at the air. “Oh, but I haven’t slept in two days and I haven’t noticed any side effects.”

Loki blinked.

Darcy grinned. “Shock you?”

“Not as much,” he said. “But yes.”

“Told you.”

“Mm. Prove me wrong later,” he said, lacing his words with promise. “We have people to kill.”

“Right.” Darcy wiggled her fingers. “Want me to just give you power? I think you could probably make better use of it. Seeing as I still need runes and it’s slow as shit. Also, Gamora’s hella badass, give her a knife. I know you’ve got spares in your weird space storage pocket thingies.”

“Lending me your seidr is a clever idea,” Loki said, cocking his head and considering the arsenal he had tucked away. “And I have several blades I believe would suit what I saw of Gamora’s fighting style. Shall we?”

“They know you’re coming,” Darcy said, voice dropping as she opened her door. “They’ll be ready. We’re hiding out in our rooms so the guards at the door don’t hear us still up and get suspicious.”

Gamora walked out of her room, giving Loki an impassive once-over. He cocked an eyebrow, and she shrugged. “Heard her talking,” she said, jerking her head toward Darcy.

“Right here,” Darcy stage whispered. For a half second, Loki thought she and Gamora were on poor terms, but then he caught the curve of Darcy’s lips and the faint crinkle at the corners of Gamora’s eyes and realized that somehow in the last two days they’d gotten friendly enough to banter.

Darcy chucked a pillow at a door across the living room and missed.

“Allow me,” Loki said, disproportionately amused, and hurled another pillow with pinpoint accuracy. It struck the door with a muffled thump.

“Show off,” she said without rancor, and knocked lightly on the door next to her own.

Jane emerged seconds later, shooting Darcy a nervous grin and Loki a nod. Helen took slightly longer, barely giving the pillows on the ground outside her door a glance. “Are we waiting here, being evacuated, or fighting with you?” she said briskly.

“The choice is yours,” Loki said. “The only weapons I have at my behest are blades, however. If you wish a firearm, you must take one from a soldier.”

Helen shrugged. “There’s two outside the door.”

“I like how you think,” Gamora said, and proceeded to kick the door down.
Darcy rolled her eyes. “I’m rapidly figuring out why mages are such snobs about nonmages,” she said as Gamora lit into the soldiers. “You could’ve just magicked the door away.”

“I am not a snob about nonmages,” Loki said.

Darcy gave him a look.

He reconsidered. “Perhaps slightly.”

“Please,” Helen said. “You ought to be more self-aware than that.”

“Mages are frequently snobs about those who cannot cast,” Gamora said, entering the room with multiple guns in her hands. She tossed one automatic rifle each to Helen and Jane, then followed them up with spare ammunition, and tucked two handguns into her waistband. “Trust me.”

“Excuse you,” Loki said. His mood had improved exponentially and he grinned sharply at her. “You don’t even know me.”

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“So you’ve got a plan, then?” Helen said, shifting her grip on her gun. Four men in suits rounded the corner ahead of them. Two froze, but the others got off shouts before gunfire from Helen and Gamora tore through the hall. Loki let them handle it. Helen’s spray of bullets was haphazard where Gamora’s was precise, but both managed to hit their marks, and all four men dropped.

Helen looked determined, but Jane was biting her lip, hands white-knuckled on the gun. “I don’t
“Give Gamora your weapon, then,” Loki said evenly, determined not to shame her. She was a scientist, not a soldier, and he was all too familiar with the sensation of being ostracized for preferring to sit and read rather than get bloody in the training grounds to not sympathize. “Stay behind me; I’ll cover you with my wards.”

“Keep this,” Gamora said, trading a handgun for Jane’s rifle. “As backup.”

Jane took a steadying breath and gripped the smaller gun, looking immensely relieved.

Gamora shot Loki an assessing look. He wanted to say *No need to be so surprised, I’m only cruel to people who cross me*, but restrained himself. They needed to fight together for the next few minutes. It made little sense to cause conflict at this precise moment.

“Hey,” Jane hissed, pointing to the side. “That looks important.”

Loki ran his hands over the metal panel in the wall. “It does indeed…”

With a little pulse of *seidr*, the lock melted, and the door swung open unhindered.

He was dimly aware of his smile as he examined the contents. Wires, switches, circuits, all the Midgardian technological words he was slowly learning. An electrical junction of some kind, or an access panel. It mattered little, beyond that it provided him an entrance.

“What are you doing?” Gamora hissed.

“Causing some chaos,” Loki murmured, and ripped half the panel out of the wall.

Darcy snorted, standing close by his side. “That one,” she said, pointing to a switch on the bottom. “It’s red. Must be important.”

Loki snapped the plastic casing of the switchboard away and pressed his fingers to the exposed wires beneath, sending a pulse of raw *seidr* into them.

Lights flickered and died. Loki twisted *seidr* around his eyes and the world flickered back into view, if only for him. An alarm began to sound.

“I can’t see,” Helen hissed.

He huffed a sigh and extended the vision spell to Helen, Jane, Darcy, and Gamora.

“Not bad,” Gamora said, and glanced at the knives Loki summoned to his hands to do more damage to the wiring. “Do you have any blades I can borrow?”

“Double handed swords?” he asked.

“How’d you know?”

“I saw you fight in your father’s hive city,” he said, knowing full well she wouldn’t like hearing Thanos referred to as her father.

Sure enough, she shot him an admirable glare. “Yes. Preferably not too heavy. I know what sorts of weapons you Aesir prefer.”

“Not all of them are so flashy and fond of brute force as my brother,” Loki said, and gestured
vaguely in her direction. Two swords he’d won off one of the dwarves in a bet decades ago appeared on the floor in front of her. They were graceful, slender, and too short to be well suited for his height, so he’d only used them a few times. He preferred either daggers or a bladed staff or spear.

Gamora tugged one of the blades halfway out of its sheath and examined the metal with grudging admiration. “Dwarf work?”

“Good eye.”

“Nothing beats the metalwork that comes from Nidavellir,” Gamora said. “I’d recognize it in a heartbeat.”

Loki found resistance. They’d integrated some of whatever technology limited his influence on their computer and electrical networks to the hotel building already. *Clever mortals*, he thought with irritation, and sent another surge of *seidr* into the wiring, shaped this time, so it melted every hardware connection within several hundred feet of himself. They’d have an exceedingly difficult time getting this building running again. If there was anything left of it, that is, by the time he was through.

“How astute.”

She elbowed him, but when he looked down, she was fighting a smirk.

Loki waved a hand and murmured a few words, feeling every door along the hallway weld shut. He could feel mortal minds behind some of them if he concentrated, but with the locks melted and the doors seamlessly integrated with their frames as if they’d never been separate pieces of wood, divided by paint and purpose, any occupants would find it exceedingly difficult to challenge them from behind.

“I cannot help myself,” he said. “She’s practically asking for it. So prickly.”

“She wasn’t this tense with us,” Darcy said. “Maybe it’s men.”

“Or perhaps it’s just me,” Loki said. “I tend to have that effect on people.”

Darcy laughed quietly. “Yeah, no shit.”

“Except you.”

“Eh… you did a little,” she said. “At first. But mostly you just made me really freaking curious.”

Gratifying. He smirked.

“Don’t let it go to your head,” she said.

“Too late.”
Gamora lifted a fist over her shoulder.

“No need for the drama,” Loki said, strolling past her. “Soldiers?”

“Loki,” she hissed, but he was already shoving through the double doors ahead of her without bothering to look through the windows set in them.

Darcy was right behind him, hands resting lightly at his back. He could feel her leaving her own power reserve open for his use, even more obviously tingling against his own, discrete and unique, but still compatible. It wasn’t a large well of power, really. The same size as before, and more easily refilled than his own for its smaller size. But he’d use all the weapons at his disposal, including those granted to his temporary use by Darcy.

Bullets rattled the second he threw the doors open.

Loki shielded, but not fast enough. A metal slug bit into his left thigh. He hissed in pain and clenched his fists. Bones shattered and the man who’d pulled the trigger collapsed, his spine now little more than gravel. One of the others made a gasping sound, quickly choked off as Loki cut off his airway.

The remaining eight jumped forward, weapons up.

Gamora slid into the fray, green form flickering lithe and deadly among the hail of bullets. Loki didn’t bother shielding her; he could see clearly she knew how to move and dodge. He concentrated on casting illusions—specters of himself, standing and mocking and swinging shadow-weapons, distracting. The soldiers panicked, firing in random directions, and it was easy for Gamora to slip between them and end their lives one by one.

Loki dropped the illusions and killed the last soldier himself with a short black-bladed dagger. Blood spattered his fingers and arm when he pulled the knife from the woman’s neck. Her body collapsed bonelessly.

“Arrogant,” Gamora spat, glaring pointedly at Loki’s leg.

He examined the wound with irritation. His body and seidr were already working to push out the bullet; the blood flow was slowing, but in the right light there was clearly a patch of moisture on his black cargo pants around the wound. “Perhaps I simply don’t care,” he said mildly.

Gamora’s eyes flashed. Truly, she was easy to rile. When presented with such an easy mark Loki found it nigh impossible to resist. He did wish he knew why she disliked him so.

Jane and Helen emerged a second later. Jane swallowed hard when she saw the bodies on the floor; Helen’s face only hardened, but she did reach out and tightly grip Jane’s hand. Neither of them would have seen anything like this before.

“Are you certain you wish to stay?” Loki said. He would prefer not to spend seidr worldwalking them somewhere safe, but he would if they wished.

“I’m staying,” Jane said. “To help where I can. And maybe they have research I can use if we find a database. They’ve been messing with us for ages now.”

“And I stay with her,” Helen said flatly. Loki saw the unspoken remainder of her sentence—even though I have far less at stake here than the rest of you. Even though, for me, this isn’t nearly so personal.

Loki much preferred Helen to Thor. His oaf brother—Loki knew the type of woman Thor preferred
on Asgard. Clever but not brilliant, kind, soft, quick to laugh, easy to please, willing to wait at home and serve him mead after hunts and listen to Thor’s tales of glory and battle. None of these traits were slurs on the characters of the women—though neither was any of them what Loki looked for—but Jane didn’t suit what Thor wanted in the slightest. Likely he’d just been captured by how different she was, and by her willingness to hang on his every word about the Nine Realms and Asgard, though her fascination was with the world he offered her a glimpse of more than it was with him.

Helen, though—Helen quite clearly saw Jane’s brilliance, and reveled in it, and could match it. Helen was the more pragmatic of the two, the more ruthless, able to provide a clearer direction for Jane even as Jane reminded Helen to see the beauty of discovery they’d both fallen in love with long ago. Because Darcy cared about Jane, Loki had an interest in Jane’s happiness, and it was a pleasure to see her return every bit of the pressure Helen put on her hand.

“These were more than a simple patrol,” Gamora said, toeing one of the bodies, but her eyes were on Loki and he suspected she’d seen a momentary softness to his face. He compensated by pouring acid and disdain into the arch of his eyebrows as she spoke, and her expression rapidly soured. “Too many of them—I’ve been listening at the door, and they travel in packs of three to maintain a security perimeter in this building while the cleanup crews go to work. They know we’re out.”

“How could they not?” Loki drawled. “I’ve more experience with mortals than you, and I can assure you they are not that stupid.”

“Hey,” Darcy said.

“Sorry, love.”

He spoke without thinking and only realized what he’d said after it slipped out.

No one but Darcy seemed to notice. Gamora was talking, something about generator rooms and an overheard conversation about how they’d taken over this large luxury hotel as a temporary base of operations and the one next door was populated by refugees so they couldn’t cause any large explosions, but Loki couldn’t focus over the panic in his head.

“Did you just call me love?”

And if I did? He couldn’t look at Darcy. Didn’t dare reach for the mental link and strengthen it to get a sense of her feelings in this moment. Afraid of what he’d find, cursing himself for nine kinds of a cowardly fool.

Silly mocking nickname or was there some truth to it?

He let the back of his hand brush hers. All the best lies are built on a foundation of truth.

That was definitely a catch to her breathing.

Neither of them looked at the other.

“What do you think?”

Loki blinked. Refocused. Ran back over the unprocessed impressions of the last few seconds of Gamora’s monologue.

“Sounds like a good plan,” Helen said. “Not that I’m an expert, mind, but I do have a genius level IQ.”
“What is this IQ?” Gamora said.

“What’s an intelligence quotient?” Jane said.

Two more soldiers rounded the corner and opened their mouths to shout. Loki dropped them with a pair of throwing knives and then called the knives back to his hands with the enchantments forged into the metal. “Descend level by level, fighting our way through? Seems akin to a battering ram.”

Gamora folded her arms. “Have you got a better idea?”

“Under normal circumstances, I’d approve,” Loki said. “I’m in the mood for a battle. Preferably one fought up close and personal. But three of our number have little to no combat experience.” He considered what he knew of Midgardian architecture, and smirked. “Perhaps we ought to send them a little gift through the air vents.”

Helen cocked her head. “I did overhear something about a lab on the top floor, and there was a sign for a stairwell not far behind us.”

“Think you could cook something up?” Darcy asked.

Helen’s answering smile was as steel as her spine. “I have three PhD’s, Darcy, and one of them is in chemistry, what do you think?”

Their gift was shockingly easy to create.

The scientists were easily overpowered and either dead or unconscious in the corner, depending on how strongly they resisted. Most of the soldiers guarding the makeshift lab floor were dead as well.

Loki paid close attention as Helen and Jane created the weapon, and spent five minutes designing and then testing a spell to precisely counteract its effects in their own bodies. After casting it by drawing runes on each of their arms, he and Darcy watched Gamora and Helen and Jane slide into the air vents.

“How will we know when they found the ventilation hub?” Darcy said softly.

Loki half shrugged. “I suspect the United Nations personnel dropping like overripe fruit will serve as an excellent signal.”

She snorted. They started down the stairwell, footsteps muffled by the carpet. It really was a rather luxurious hotel, at least by Midgardian standards. On the way up, they’d cleared all the levels they passed, and made sure no signals reached the soldiers’ comrades below. It was a quiet descent.

Loki could feel Darcy’s mind working at full speed, and he had a very good idea of what had her thoughts so occupied, but she said not a word, likely deciding this wasn’t the time or place for that conversation. He was infuriatingly glad. He was still mentally excoriating himself for letting that idiotic word slip out of his lips, even in jest. It wasn’t something either of them had said, or even touched upon. They’d clung to their agreement to take this day by day until Thanos was defeated, and then have a conversation about… whatever this thing between them was. All the unsaid words were piling up and Loki had no idea where to start, because this was too sudden and he hadn’t even thought it possible for him to feel anything like this anymore but there it was, burning away in his heart and mind, and he couldn’t remember ever having been this simultaneously exhilarated and afraid.
Caring was a weakness. Caring was a vulnerability he could not afford.

*Coward*, he thought savagely, and made himself rephrase. Made himself use the word he’d been avoiding even in his thoughts.

*Love* was a weakness. *Love* was a vulnerability he could not afford.

And even if he disregarded the complications of whether she returned this feeling, whether he could bring himself to be honest with her about it, whether she could look past his true heritage when it came to their bed as well as their team—there was still the looming threat of her mortality.

Darcy Lewis was going to die within the next eighty years unless Loki could find some way to cheat death.

The Apples of Idunn were the obvious answer. They’d been used in the past to elevate a mortal to immortal standing. But it would be nigh impossible to get one; Idunn, who guarded her grove, had come from nowhere and nothing, had no family or origin, had an untraceable accent and a heart with more jealousy even than Loki’s. She trusted no one with her apples, not since that incident with Tyr and the Xandarian maiden seven decades ago, and there was always the threat of Idunn revoking the immortality her apples offered. It was her *seidr* that flowed through her grove and imbued the trees and fruits with their magic properties, and it was she who could take away any gift bestowed by her trees on a whim.

Loki hated the thought of being so beholden to anyone, especially a goddess he trusted so little and knew not nearly well enough to manipulate. He knew Darcy would feel the same.

*You’re getting ahead of yourself,* he thought. *Assuming she would accept the apple if it were offered. Accept the burden of immortality? When she has friends, and a powerful position with opportunity for advancement, and she would have to watch her companions all die one by one? For you? A fool’s hope. And if you can bring yourself to make the offer and she turns you down, it will break you. Better to break her first.*

Loki gritted his teeth. It was an instinct born of centuries of daring to begin letting someone in, only to have them move on to bigger and better things. He’d clawed his way out of a pit of desperation and despair that he’d been cast into when the lies his life was built on came crashing down, but it would be so easy to slip back. To revert to that pain-mad creature he’d become, to lash out at anyone and everyone around him, hurt and chase them away before they could do so to him.

*I trust the Avengers,* he thought stubbornly. *I trust Darcy.*

It was terrifying to make himself admit it, even now. Terrifying to put himself in this vulnerable position again. All the instincts he’d developed were screaming that this was foolish, he should leave if he could not bring himself to hurt them, take away the chance of betrayal.

But he’d try.

“This is the floor we were on before, yeah?” Darcy asked quietly.

He checked the numbers. “Yes.”

“So down one more, we’re likely to find patrols.”

“I’m surprised we haven’t seen any yet,” Loki mused. “Someone ought to be suspicious by now that no one above floor… fourteen is responding to their radio.”
“Maybe they got smart and put everyone in one place,” Darcy said. “Since coming after you in groups of less than fifteen is just obviously idiotic.”

They reached the floor below the one she’d been imprisoned on. “What a concept, a mortal with a head for tactics,” Loki said, smirking, as he tugged open the door. “I do wish—”

A bullet whined through the gap and sank into Darcy’s chest, right below the collarbone.

Her mouth turned into an O of surprise, and she sank to the floor in slow motion.

Loki’s entire body went numb.

His anger had always been like this. Icy, calculated, vicious. Never this strong, though. Never at a level that made him think he could end a trillion innocent lives and not feel a thing.

“Darcy,” he breathed, “stay with me,” and wishing to the Norns he’d worked harder at healing spells though they were the opposite of natural to him, he cradled her body—so small, so fragile—to his chest, he tore the curtains of space aside and deposited her in Avengers Tower. In the clinic, where the first of Helen’s cradles to come off the assembly line had gone into use only days prior.

He ignored the shock and screams of patients and staff alike, finding an empty cradle nearby and depositing Darcy onto its surface.

“Sir—sir, that cradle’s been booked—”

“I don’t care,” Loki hissed, whirling on the man who had dared lay a hand on his shoulder, who blanched and stepped back. “You are a doctor, yes? Versed in the use of this device?”

“Uh—yes, Dr. Widman—”

“Excellent. Heal her,” Loki said, laying a gentle hand on Darcy’s shoulder. “If she is not alive when I return, you will spend the remainder of your short time on this realm wishing Hela had taken you years ago.”

He didn’t wait to see the reaction to his threat. Loki was gone, stepping back into the stairwell he’d vacated less than thirty seconds before, in the midst of a pack of confused and shouting soldiers.

Ice in his heart. Ice in his eyes.

If she died—

“Surrender or we shoot,” someone barked, but Loki was already moving.

He’d been willing, before, to leave them alive where he could. Helen’s gaseous weapon was debilitating but nonlethal and Loki had resolved to spare anyone he left unconscious, anyone who surrendered, and anyone who ran away.

But that bullet felled Darcy and any inclination he had towards mercy with her, and now Loki was conscious of little but the desire for blood.

Runewards flared around him as bullets were deflected. He drew back power from the wards and hissed as his modified armor absorbed one impact after another. Some of the bullets reached his skin and he welcomed the pain, relished the edge that it gave him.

They died one by one, knives in their bodies and fear in their eyes, and Loki looked down at himself when they’d all fallen and saw their blood mingling with Darcy’s on his hands and arms and clothes,
and knew he was far from finished.
Jane was sick of vents.

They were cramped, and dusty, and the air was stale, and her knees and elbows and hands hurt from shimmying along, and she’d never been claustrophobic but it was hard not to imagine the walls crushing closed around her. The fit was tight for her and worse for Gamora; all three of them had to inch along with their arms stretched out in front of them in an army crawl.

“How do you know where you’re going?” Helen hissed behind them.

Jane relayed the question up to Gamora.

“Intuition,” Gamora replied. “And logic. The security center and the controls for the ventilation system are probably on the lowest floors.”

Jane passed this information back to Helen, even though they’d been over it once or twice already.

She really wanted out of here.

Gamora paused.

“What is it?” Jane hissed.

“See for yourself.” Gamora inched forward, and Jane scooted up until she could see what Gamora had seen through a grille: a trail of bodies leading down a hallway, some covered in wounds and some seemingly killed without a trace of a weapon. At least one of them appeared to have suddenly and traumatically found his skeleton gone.

“Loki’s work,” Jane said, unnecessarily.

“Scoot,” Helen said, shoving lightly at Jane’s heels.

Jane couldn’t resist pettily shoving back before she crept forward, and was rewarded, when she contorted her body to get a glance backwards under her own torso, with Helen’s gleaming smile. The walls loosened up a bit.

“He’s angry,” Helen said.

“What tipped you off?” Gamora’s voice was dry as the Sahara, making Jane laugh into her sleeve.

A few minutes farther on, they had definitely found a vent that sloped downward, and once Jane thought past the insistent fear of the slope increasing until they toppled into a vertical shaft, she decided it was a good sign.

“How long have Loki and Darcy been together?” Gamora said suddenly.

Jane coughed. “Um, what?” Darcy still hadn’t given her more than vagaries about the nature of her involvement with Loki, but Jane knew there was something more going on there than friendship, and
had been for a while. She wouldn’t pry. She knew how hard it was for Darcy to open up to anyone, even her best friend, about feelings, and how hard it must’ve been for Darcy to trust anyone else even a little bit. After a series of asshole boyfriends and girlfriends, coupled with Marya’s death, she was honestly surprised Darcy had even considered a friends-with-benefits arrangement. And Jane didn’t know people but she did know Darcy, well enough to tell this was more than just that.

“Don’t play dumb,” Gamora said. “You’re an intelligent woman, and you and Darcy are clearly quite good friends.”

Jane considered the responses she could give, ignoring the way Helen was tugging at her ankles. “I don’t think this is a conversation I should be having with you.”

“With me, specifically, or anyone in general?” Gamora said. Impossible to read.

“Careful,” Helen said, almost too quiet to hear.

“With anyone,” Jane said. “That’s my friend you’re talking about.” And we keep each other’s secrets.

“Why do you want to know so badly, anyway?” Helen challenged, and Jane made a note to thank her later for the backup.

Gamora’s crawling didn’t pause. “I’ve known a number of men like him before, and a number of girls like Darcy. It does not end well.”

“It’s hardly your problem,” Jane huffed. She was in pretty good shape, but this was starting to wear on her. Though she suspected the psychological boredom had more to do with her tiredness than actual physical exhaustion.

“To be perfectly honest, I like Darcy,” Gamora said. “We spent two days locked in this cursed hotel and it was enough for me to determine that much.”

Jane was still putting the pieces together when Helen muttered, “She thinks Loki’s just using Darcy.”

Jane glared at the soles of Gamora’s feet and decided she was angry.

But before she’d worked out what to say, Gamora paused. “I believe I’ve found the security and janitorial areas,” she said, and then there was a clang as she kicked out a grate and then she dropped through feetfirst. Screams, thuds, and splattering sounds followed soon after.

“I don’t think I like her,” Jane said flatly.

Helen snorted. “Jury’s out for me. Is it safe to go through?”

Jane scrambled forward until she could see through the open space in the vent and winced slightly away from the bodies inside. Some dead, some groaning and collapsed. Gamora was already sliding into a chair in front of a bank of computers, typing away.

“Looks like it,” she said, and wriggled forward until her feet were over the vent and she could scoot backwards and drop with a graceless thud. At least she didn’t fall over.

Helen landed with marginally more skill. “Found the ventilation system’s controls?”

“I think,” Gamora said, hands moving much more slowly than Jane was used to seeing people type. “I know your language from travelers… reading and writing is difficult for me. As is your
“Travelers,” Jane said, mind already spinning. She barely noticed Helen pushing Gamora aside and taking over the typing and software manipulation. They weren’t even hacking; you didn’t need a password to find the controls for the air conditioning and crank them up. “People from Earth?”

Gamora stood up and crossed her arms. “All those ‘alien abductions’ you humans are so fond of ranting about on obscure Internet platforms? Some are real. Sometimes your scientists meddle where they shouldn’t. Sometimes the people in charge, whoever they are, cover things up for one reason or another.”

“How do you know so much about Earth?” Helen asked without looking up from the computer. Her tone was mild, but Jane thought she could see suspicion in Helen’s posture somewhere.

Gamora looked down. “There was a man I knew. Kidnapped from Terra—Earth—raised with a band of thieves and scavengers. Thanos held him prisoner for a time for trying to interfere with one of his cronies’ shipping lines. He told me what he knew of Earth.”

“What happened to him?” Jane asked, curious.

“He died.”

Jane didn’t bother with platitudes. She never knew which one to use and they always seemed horribly useless anyway. Plus Gamora didn’t seem the kind to take a halfhearted “I’m so sorry” as comfort, unlike so many of the soft, hyperemotional people Jane had known.

“Got it,” Helen said. “We should feel the airflow increase soon. Jane, you’ve got the detonator?”

“Right here.” Jane pulled it out of her pocket and tossed Gamora the cobbled-together device. It had once been the remote from a TV in one of the hotel rooms. Tony had managed to talk them through creating the remote detonated release on the gas bomb Helen made, in between shooting people and dodging when they shot back. “Do we detonate?”

Gamora caught it easily in one hand. “We trust Loki’s spells?”

“Yes,” Helen said. “Why would we not?”

“I don’t trust him,” Gamora said.

“We can tell,” Helen muttered under her breath.

And just like that, Jane’s anger came back. She spent three seconds scrambling for something to say, worrying over her word choice, and then decided to stop caring about what exactly she said for once and just talk.

“You need to get over yourself,” she said. “Plenty of people are untrustworthy assholes, but if you can bring yourself to trust us then you can bring yourself to trust our judgment of him. I am not good at reading people. Know who is? Darcy. Know who else? Tony Stark. Clint Barton. Natasha Romanoff. Steve Rogers. Wanda Maximoff can read minds, and she’s been in Loki’s. Loki was under your father’s control when he put Maria through psychological torture, but he still did it, and even Maria managed to get over how much she disliked him because he is our teammate. So whatever is going on between him and Darcy is none of your business, since you literally showed up like three days ago, while all the rest of us have been around the two of them since they met. You don’t get to just waltz in here all holier than thou and pretend you have Darcy’s best interests at heart when really, you’ve just got a problem with Loki and you think misplaced concern for a woman
you’ve known less than three days is a good excuse.”

Helen’s eyebrows were practically in her hair by the time Jane finished her tirade.

Gamora, though, looked furious. Jane still couldn’t find it in herself to be afraid.

“Fine,” Gamora snapped, her expression somewhere in the middle of earnest and anguished and angry. “You want to know why I don’t trust him? He is a liar, a master manipulator. He is one of the most cunning and devious people this universe has ever produced. Even in the worlds that lie between the Nine Realms, Loki Odinson—Laufeyson, I suppose—his name is the equivalent of brightly colored poisonous wildlife. And I find him here, clearly sleeping with a mortal woman, and you expect me to believe he’s not just using her? He could well be using all of you.”

Jane wasn’t sure what to say for a second, because Gamora—she wasn’t completely wrong.

“Maybe,” Helen said evenly. “But that’d be our problem to deal with, not yours. And I mean this in the least confrontational way possible, but you haven’t exactly spent enough time around here to judge whether or not Loki is using Darcy.” She tilted her head. “If he is, he’s in for a surprise, because she can use him right back.”

“He’s saved all our lives,” Jane said. “And some of us have… maybe not saved his, exactly, but definitely kept him from getting as beaten up as he would’ve been otherwise.” Her sentences were clumsy in her mouth, machetes where she wanted scalpels. “And he’s been through a lot. Maybe consider… that he actually has friends. That he might want to stick around because we are his friends.”

“I saw his mind,” Gamora said quietly. “A pattern of thinking that’s ancient, and cunning, and ruthless, and selfish, and cold. On Asgard, he had no friends.”

“Maybe that was less his choice and more the fact that there was no one who wanted to be friends with the scrawny, weak, mage-prince,” Helen said, and her words were poison darts, flying as true as Clint’s arrows. “You’d know all about sibling rivalry. About clawing for the top with someone as close to you as your expression in the mirror for a parent figure’s favor.” Jane watched Helen carefully. She’d picked up enough hints to know this subject was close to Helen’s past, too. “Now consider if you and Nebula weren’t so well-matched. If you grew up in a place where her talents were valued significantly higher than yours.”

Gamora was silent for a long few seconds. “Thor,” she said at last. “I never thought…”

“Clearly,” Helen said acidly, and held out a hand for the detonator, wiggling her fingers. “Can I have that? We do have a job to perform here.”

Gamora offered the detonator to Helen. She still didn’t seem convinced, but at least she was willing to concede for now. “I confess I believed the isolation I saw in him through Thanos was mutual. That he was truly mad, and truly loathed all others around him. But you insist this isn’t true, and I admit that you’re a difficult group of people to fool so thoroughly…”

“Through Thanos,” Jane said. Pieces fell into place. “You don’t have telepathic abilities of your own, do you?”

“No…”

“So Thanos showed you Loki’s mind, through his own seidr.”

Gamora’s expression didn’t change. “You believe he manipulated my perception of Loki.”
Jane shrugged. “I wouldn’t rule it out.”

“Ah,” Gamora hissed suddenly, turning around and punching the wall hard enough to dent. She studied her split knuckles clinically.

Helen detonated the gas. “Time’s running,” she said. “Did that wall insult you?”

Gamora’s back was to them, head bowed.

Jane bit her lip. Gamora had been annoying the last few hours but she was an ally, and everyone was on edge after what had just happened. She’d watched the man who raised her—admittedly terribly—tortured to death by a man who apparently had an even more widespread and terrifying reputation than Jane had thought. That would put anyone on edge. And it had been infuriatingly self-centered but Gamora…it did seem that she’d meant well by worrying about Loki using Darcy. Jane guessed if she hadn’t spent so much time around the Tower, seeing them interact, that she would worry about the same thing.

“Um. Are you. Okay?”

She suddenly and randomly remembered a gif of someone attempting to comfort a crying woman by patter her on the shoulder with a broom. That person is me, she thought.

Gamora laughed bitterly. “No.”

“…why did you punch the wall?”

Helen stayed silent, watching them with an unreadable face.

“Every time,” Gamora said, and stopped, and started again. “Every time I think I’ve found all the ways he manipulated and lied to me, I find out…”

“Rock bottom has a basement?” Helen suggested drily.

Join the club.

“I’m not familiar with your idioms,” Gamora said. “But that one seems fairly self-explanatory. Yes.”

Jane looked past them at the security monitors as movement caught her eye. “There’s Lo…”

Her voice trailed off.

“Shit,” Helen said.

Loki stalked into the room on the screen, either unaware or past caring that a camera watched him. Soldiers opened fire but their bullets disappeared in midair. A few made it through Loki’s shield somehow, but he ignored the wounds they tore in his legs and stomach and chest and slid forward like a snake.

Jane had seen people like Natasha, who fought like it was a dance, and people like Bucky and Steve, who fought like it was a war of attrition, and people like the Hulk and to some degree Tony, where it was just about blowing up or crushing the enemy any way you could. She’d almost never seen Loki fight. And never like this.

He moved like a knife. Direct and efficient and deadly. Never a wasted step, never a hesitation.

Blood sprayed on the walls and up his already red-stained skin. Around him, men died at a
staggering rate.

“Where’s Darcy?” Jane said, except it came out a whisper.

“Fuck,” Helen said, and then she was at the computer, scanning through security feeds. Jane tracked the images and saw what Helen was doing—backtracking Loki’s trail of carnage through the building. There was no sign of Darcy anywhere.

Jane went back to watching Loki kill.

He finished the people in the room and glanced up at the camera, once, briefly.

Gamora reached around her and paused the feed. On the next screen over, the still shot appeared while Loki in real time turned away and walked out of sight again.

In the still, his eyes were dead and empty, glittering fury suspended over absolute emptiness. Jane almost flinched back. It wasn’t the first time she’d seen him with all his humanity peeled away, but it was close.

He looked like he had on the surveillance footage of the invasion of New York. Worse, because this time he had no bags under his eyes, no pallor to his skin, none of the physical signs of torture. Just the madness.

“This,” Gamora said quietly. “This is why you shouldn’t trust him.”

“Darcy’s been injured,” Jane said matter-of-factly. It was a horrible conclusion but it brought her relief, mostly because she hated not knowing more than anything else. “And he’s lost it.”

“That’s for damn sure,” Gamora said. “I need to stop him.”

“Why?” Helen said. “They kidnapped us. They’re holding us here illegally, working directly on Ross’ orders.”

“They’re surrendering,” Gamora said. “And he’s about to kill them all.”

Jane looked at the screen and saw she was right. Loki had found the lobby, where a man with medals on his chest was shouting orders that everyone ignored, and a large contingent of soldiers was slowly falling to its knees. But Loki angled his head like a predator, and she knew Gamora was right.

_They hurt Darcy._

She bit her lip.

Loki raised his knives.

“You’re truly going to do nothing?” Gamora said, staring incredulously at Helen and Jane as Loki started killing.

_They hurt Darcy_, Jane thought. “If we’re doing this, we might as well do it all the way.”

Gamora huffed out a sigh. “I underestimated humans.”

“What, we’re not all idiots?” Helen said.

“You’re capable of far greater ruthlessness than I expected.”
When they stepped out of the sickening lurch that came with stepping from Berlin to New York (Jane had to restrain herself from making Loki do it again, except with the new Calabi-Yau theoretical spatial calculations she’d gotten from CalTech the previous week at hand), the smell of hospitals hit them in the face.

None of them even had to say a word. “This way,” a harried-looking doctor said, and trotted away.

“What did you say to them?” Helen asked Loki as they followed, dodging between lines of patients and doctors. Clearly, the Stark Industries clinic had opened its doors to people who’d been injured by the Daavi.

Loki didn’t even look their way. “That if she died, the staff here would come to regret ever having been born.”

“I’m sure he looked terrifying,” Gamora added under her breath.

Loki ignored her. Jane bit her lips. She didn’t want to give Gamora the satisfaction of a laugh; she didn’t like the other woman enough for that yet. Also, she was too worried about Darcy.

Then again, she thought someone would’ve told them when they came back through.

Unless Darcy had… died, and this was all to lure Loki into a trap so he didn’t lose his mind and blow up the tower. Or something.

Jane kept that thought to herself.

“Here,” the doctor said breathlessly, stopping by a private room. “She’s unconscious, but she’ll recover fully, probably wake up in a day or so. I have other people to see to, push the red button if anything—”

Loki shoved him aside without even looking at the man and opened the door.

“Sorry,” Helen said, not sounding remotely apologetic.

The doctor glared at them, eyes turning slightly fearful when he looked at Gamora, and left. Quickly.

Jane pushed into Darcy’s room.

Her friend looked so small in the hospital bed, pale and tiny beneath the sheets. Her eyelids looked faintly bruised and there was a tube in her throat and she was asleep, but breathing. Alive.

Loki pulled out a chair and sat next to Darcy’s bed. He didn’t touch her, only sat straight and attentive and perfectly still, eyes never wavering from her face.

Jane dragged another of the padded metal chairs over by the other side of the bed, and sat down across from Loki, taking one of Darcy’s cool hands in her own on impulse.

Helen settled by the wall next to Jane, and Gamora leaned on the edge of the door, tipping back her head.

Friday beeped. “I’ve informed Mr. Stark of your arrival,” she said. “He’s asked me to tell you the
rest of the team will be here soon.”

“Thank you,” Helen said when no one else responded.

“Of course.” Friday’s speakers beeped again.

Jane sighed and leaned over. She really shouldn’t be this tired, but she was, and the edge of the bed was soft, and it was somehow comforting in here even though it was a hospital, and smelled like one. Comforting because she had Helen at her back and Darcy here, breathing, alive, going to be fine, and Loki across from her and Gamora at the door, and even Gamora was something of a relief. They might not like each other but Jane knew Gamora wouldn’t let anyone hurt any of them.

She closed her eyes.
“So… peace?”

Wanda examined Thor. Clint wondered what she was thinking, but she’d gotten much better at managing her expressions, and even he couldn’t read much in her beyond hesitation. Tasha might; he’d ask her later.

Thor, on the other hand—his emotional turmoil was written large over his face. Clint restrained himself from rolling his eyes. Loki was on emotional lockdown, present only because the doctors had assured him Darcy was fully stabilized and the rest of the Avengers had spent three hours persuading him (with occasional threats of violence) that for PR reasons he needed to be at Thor’s dramatic send-off. So Loki stood with the rest of them in a half circle on the roof of Avengers Tower, while news helicopters hovered safe distances away and a wind-disheveled group of reporters huddled behind the press cordon fifty feet away, facing Thor and his friends one last time. And Thor couldn’t seem to quiet the distress, confusion, anger, and bitterness that showed loud and clear whenever he looked at Loki. Which was often.

“Peace,” Thor said. “For the time being. Your threat to Midgard was only that you would not surrender to Thanos. He has been vanquished. The Allfather will allow you to remain here.” His jaw set stubbornly.

Clint didn’t think Odin the Asshole had actually agreed to that, but Thor was stubborn as shit when he put his mind to things and he seemed to have put it to the cause of leaving the Avengers the hell alone, so he wasn’t too worried. They’d have a year or two at least.

“Great,” Tony said. “I’m sure you’ll throw some spectacular victory feasts on Asgard.”

Like you’re not throwing a rager to celebrate, Clint thought, swallowing a grin. Tony had changed, mostly for the better, but he still liked drinks and parties and attention and attractive people and his face on the television. Natasha had already found the guest list. All the Avengers were invitees of honor. Tony was hosting. Clint had found the booze order, and there were going to be a lot of happy drunks.

“You are certain Thanos is dead?” Volstagg said in his rockslide voice. “It would be unpleasant to have him suddenly return in a few years.”

“Yeah,” Clint said. “He’s dead. We watched him die.”

Watched Loki kill him, he amended mentally. Clint had relived Thanos’ death multiple times in the week since they came home. It had taken less than half an hour, since the Avengers had time only to patch themselves up before they came home to keep fighting, but there had been a lot of blood and screaming. Thanos’ corpse looked more like a half-butchered livestock carcass at a slaughterhouse than anything remotely humanoid by the time Loki was done. Clint didn’t know how the Titan had even still been alive at that point.
And he was pretty sure Loki could’ve and would’ve kept going, except they had other things to do.

“We don’t appreciate the implication that we’ve been lying the last few days,” Steve said coolly.

T’Challa cocked his head. He was standing slightly apart from the Avengers, with Coulson and Prescott; all three of them were wary but not tense. “We stand as representatives of the United Nations,” he said. “The Avengers are not lying.”

Volstagg looked like he wanted to argue, but Fandral elbowed him and the big man shut his mouth.

“Loki,” Thor said, finally addressing his brother directly. Clint knew he wasn’t imagining the way Loki’s shoulders tensed, or the deepening of the lines in Hogun’s face. “Have you any words you wish me to convey to our parents?”

Loki’s jaw flexed. “If you would be so kind, tell Frigga I greatly appreciate the casting she performed on those chains you used to bind me. It was masterful work.”

Thor winced. Sif looked away. Loki’s comment had hit home.

And Loki knew it, judging by the cruel sneer tugging at his face.

“And for the Allfather?” Hogun said, when it was clear Thor wasn’t going to respond.

“I have no words for him.” Loki glanced away. As clear a dismissal as anything Clint had ever seen.

Thor took a deep breath. “Farewell. I hope we shall remain allies when once again we meet.”

Clint met Natasha’s eyes. Doubtful.

“Heimdall,” Thor called to the sky.

A second later, glittering rainbow light blazed, and the Asgardians were swallowed in a jet of energy. Then the light was gone, and them with it, leaving only an eerie, alien pattern scorched into the rooftop.

Tony examined it with mild irritation. “Seriously, do they have to cause property damage every time one of them takes the rainbow taxi?”

“It would be considered sacrilege on Asgard to speak so of the Bifrost,” Loki said, smirking.

“Good thing we’re not on Asgard,” Pietro said. “I’m pretty sure about… six or seven of us would’ve been executed for insubordination at this point.”

“You’re not incorrect,” Loki said.

Prescott cleared her throat. “Was that all you needed to do regarding their departure?”

“Other than steam clean their guest rooms, yes,” Tony said.

Coulson’s lips twitched.

“Excellent,” Prescott said briskly. She reminded Clint quite forcefully of Maria and Pepper. “In that case, I’d like to get your official statements regarding a couple of things. Mr. Stark, do you have a conference room we can use?”

“Right this way,” Tony said, gesturing expansively toward the door that would take them back
Clint glanced over at their rooftop meeting place. The chairs had been moved and the empty beer bottles had disappeared. Tony’s people making the place presentable. Removing any evidence that the Avengers were real people who needed time to unwind after the pressure of saving the world.

For just a moment, he wondered what his life would be right now if he’d made a different choice or three along the line. If maybe he’d have a wife or girlfriend waiting for him at home who wasn’t intimately familiar with the weight of a gun in her hand. If he’d have become a person who wanted kids. Peace. Quiet. Retirement.

Then Maria slipped her hand into his as the doors swung shut and hid them from the eyes of the press, a rare moment of physical affection from her, and Clint shot her a grin. It didn’t really matter whether he might’ve been someone else. They all could have at some point. Natasha might have lost her humanity completely, or Loki could’ve gone completely nuts, or Steve could’ve clung to his old ideals until he died with them, or Wanda and Pietro could’ve stayed set in their vengeance and killed any chance of teamwork.

“So,” Clint said quietly. He and Maria slowed down just a little bit, falling a few steps behind the others, their conversation camouflaged by the spirited debate rising between Prescott, Tony, Sharon, and Steve about a treaty. “We good?”

Maria looked down at their interlaced hands, then up at him. They were almost the exact same height. He loved her height. And her hair. And her eyes. “We’re good,” she said.

“Good,” he replied, grinning like an idiot. “Because I think I love you.”

That threw her for a loop. She glanced at the group ahead of them and hissed, “Well, your timing is terrible,” but her fingers tightened on his.

Clint couldn’t stop smiling. “I know.”

When Tony led Prescott, Coulson, and T'Challa into the Avengers’ common room instead of to one of the conference rooms a few floors below, Clint couldn’t hide his surprise.

Tony’s trust issues went largely unmentioned, but everyone was aware of them, and the fact that he’d let these people into their private space in the Tower definitely raised more eyebrows than Clint’s. Pietro muttered, “In here?” before Clint elbowed him quiet.

“Half the Avengers task force is dead,” Coulson said without preamble. “The UN headquarters was particularly heavily hit, and the Daavi seem to have targeted United Nations officials and other world leaders with extra attention.”

He glanced at Loki as he said it. Clint grinned. He knew these three had been told how the Avengers made it onto Thanos’ ship in the first place, and while no one had specifically asked, they were all aware that Loki had almost definitely manipulated things from the inside to target people like the task force members.

“Who’s dead?” Tony said.

“Ambassadors Ni, Marsh, and Rahal, Dr. Krause, Dr. Gorski, and Sir Ian Stone,” Prescott said briskly.
“Convenient,” Bucky said.

Clint fought back an even wider grin.

Tony pulled out a chair and sat down at the table, sprawling back irreverently. Steve and Bruce sat down on either side of him, and the rest of them began finding seats as well. Coulson, T’Challa, and Prescott sat down too, after a slight hesitation.

“I’m assuming you say ‘convenient’ because those are several of the most vocally anti-Avengers members of the task force,” T’Challa said.

“Look at that genius IQ go to work,” Sam said.

Bucky snorted. A smile tugged briefly at T’Challa’s eyes.

“Regardless of how it happened,” Prescott said, glancing ever so briefly at Loki, “there’s a lot less opposition than there was before. Particularly since you decimated the human forces Ross leveled against you, retrieved your teammates that some of the UN was illegally holding hostage, and that Stark Industries and Wakanda’s combined efforts have done much to restore stability and save lives around the world—opposition to your independence is almost gone.”

“She means to say that anyone who still wants to bring you to heel is too terrified of you to say a word,” Coulson said mildly.

“As they should be.”

Maria shot Loki a look. “Not helping.”

Loki smiled serenely. Clint decided to never interpret that expression as good news.

“Ross goes to trial as soon as we can get an international jury in place,” Prescott said. “Which could be anywhere between two weeks to a year from now, depending.”

“What’s the state of the UN right now?” Sharon said.

Prescott glanced at Coulson. “You want to take that?”

“Sure.” Coulson spread his hands on the table. “As of right now, one hundred fifty-two of the one hundred ninety-three countries in the United Nations have issued distress calls. We expect the remainder will do so as well, with the notable exception of Wakanda. The United States was also expected to sit out until half of its Cabinet died in an explosion in the desert when the new President, formerly the Vice President, joined forces with one of his generals to support Ross’ war with the Avengers. The result is that all one hundred fifty-two of those countries have signed the Emergency Powers Resolution, which consolidates local governments into a tier system not unlike the federal versus state versus county legislatures in the United States or the provincial versus federal government of Canada, and places emergency executive power into an International Minister elected by randomly selected citizens of the member countries for a six-year term.”

Clint frowned. Processing. It actually sounded like a decent system, not that he was an expert in politics by any means.

“So local governments will retain their power?” Steve said.

“It will be written in the constitution of this new International Alliance that certain powers are to remain with member countries, or with smaller, more localized legislative bodies,” Coulson said.
“The details are still being hammered out.”

*I wish Darcy was here to hear this.* Then Clint realized Friday was almost definitely recording the conversation, and that Darcy’d hear it later.

“I’d appreciate if you kept us abreast of the details,” Steve said.

“Who’s in the running for this International Minister?” Sam said.

Prescott’s fingers twitched, her only tell. “The votes have already been cast.”

Clint narrowed his eyes.

“It’s me,” she said evenly.

A beat of silence.

“Could do worse,” Natasha said.

“Thank you for the awe-inspiring vote of confidence,” Prescott said.

Tony pointed at her. “Sarcasm. I can work with you.”

“You can’t work with anyone,” Bruce said.

Tony looked wounded. “Excuse you, we work together all the time.”

“Yes, and you randomly poke me with things on a regular basis,” Bruce said. “If my self-control were any weaker—”

“Yeah, we know, you’d break the city,” Tony said. “Moving on.” He met Prescott’s eyes, seemingly undaunted by the knowledge that he had the person technically in charge of the world standing in his penthouse. Clint supposed that when you were as rich as Tony Stark, and owned a company in the position of Stark Industries, you had more leeway than most people. “Where will the Avengers be in this new arrangement?”

T’Challa glanced at Coulson. “I have been negotiating terms that I believe you will find a satisfactory beginning.” He pulled a small data drive out of his pocket and offered it to Tony.

“I don’t like being handed things,” Tony said.

T’Challa raised an eyebrow but went with it, putting the drive down on the table. Blue light flared around it and a tiny progress bar appeared on the glass as Friday started copying the files.

“This is the rough draft we have so far,” T’Challa said. “The Avengers will act as a sort of combination between a corporate entity and an independent contract protection detail hired by a company. There’s no precedent, so it’s difficult to find an analogy. You will have a representative in the new United Nations, and it’s been written into the new constitution that you will receive full cooperation from the armed forces and security and intelligence personnel of every member nation in exchange for your protection from supernatural or off-world or ‘enhanced’ security threats.”

“What about other enhanced?” Clint said, thinking of the kids in Maine. “Is that whole registration thing off the table yet? No more locking up innocent kids?”

“We know you have them hidden away somewhere,” Prescott said. “Officially, I can’t sanction what you did. Off the record, thank you. Taking them righted a wrong we never should’ve committed.
And one I argued against.” She tapped her fingers on her leg. “There will be opposition, but between the three of us we can write it in that all enhanced persons who commit crimes will be dealt with by the Avengers and if necessary incarcerated with the assistance of an international task force working for Stark Industries and the UN… any who want training to manage their powers will be sent to you—we’ll find a way to cover travel costs—until they’re either disciplined enough to lead normal lives without accidentally blowing things up, or if they choose, to join the Avengers.”

“And you can make this happen,” Natasha said, voice dripping skepticism. “Just like that.”

“I would appreciate assistance,” Prescott said. And looked at Loki. “I understand you and Miss Lewis have worked quite closely together on certain political and public relations issues. If you would help me—help us—” she gestured to herself, T’Challa, and Coulson—“help you, we can make it work. And you’ll be kept aware of every development in the process. No more secrets.”

“I will hold you to that,” Loki said.

Prescott held his gaze. “I’d expect nothing less.”

“I’m glad you didn’t die when SHIELD fell,” Natasha said.

Prescott half smiled. “As am I.”

“Is that all for today?” Coulson said.

Prescott glanced down at her hands, then back up at the group. “I think we covered it.”

T’Challa turned to Tony. “If you give me a moment to change out of my suit, I would greatly enjoy seeing your laboratory.”

“Sure,” Tony said, giving him a grin. “Friday, guide the man to one of the guest rooms on floor sixty-three. Agent and Prescott, too.”

“Agent?” Pietro said.

Tony pointed at Coulson. “His first name’s Agent.”

“I thought it was Phil,” Vision said as their guests filed out of the room, following Friday’s verbal instructions. “Philip Coulson, formerly of SHIELD employ—”

“Just go with it,” Clint said. “Seriously. Tony’s mind is a mystery best left unsolved.”

Tony smirked. “I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

The door shut behind Coulson, Prescott, and T’Challa.

“Wait,” Wanda said, as Sam and Steve started to leave also. “There’s one more thing—I didn’t want to say it with them here.”

Clint and Maria shared a glance.

“Spill,” Bucky said.

Wanda’s hands tapped nervously on her legs. “Thor…”

Loki tensed slightly.
“He was worried,” Wanda said. “Worried and preoccupied. Something to do with Odin.”

“Worried about Odin, or because of Odin?” Natasha said. Clint nodded; he’d been thinking the same thing. “Because that’s an important distinction.”

“Both, actually,” Wanda said. “Worried because something might be wrong with him, maybe an illness—”

“We don’t get ill,” Loki said absently. “Not truly, not as you would think of it.”

“That’s just the impression I got,” Wanda said. “And he was also worried about something Odin might do.”

“Probably just convincing Odin to let us be,” Bruce said. “I definitely got the sense that they hadn’t cleared that with him.”

Wanda frowned. “Maybe… but I feel like it was something else.”

Clint turned that over in his head. He couldn’t think what it might be, but he knew all about trusting his gut. More than that, he trusted Wanda. And if her instincts were telling her something was off, then something was off.

But they had no way of knowing what it was, so he stayed silent.

“Well,” Tony said after a second. “I should go down to the lab and make sure there’s nothing lying around that could spontaneously combust and kill a foreign head of state. Anyone want to help?”

“I’ll come,” Bruce said.

Loki raised one eyebrow. “Your presence is an excellent incentive to not cause any explosions.”

“Always a good thing for Tony,” Wanda agreed.

Tony crossed his arms. “You are all terrible people and I am wounded by your lack of faith in me.”

“Yeah, you look wounded,” Bucky said.

“I have a hole in my chest,” Tony said, already on his way out of the room.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Oohhh, big man Tony Stark, I have an elemental reactor jammed into my chest cavity, everything comes back to the freaking arc reactor—k”

“As it should,” Tony retorted. “I built cutting edge tech in a cave in Afghanistan with disassembled missiles and a car battery taped to my chest. If you can tell me why I shouldn’t be proud of that, I’ll buy you drinks for a year.”

The door closed on his sarcastic wave.

“I hate him,” Sam said.

“No you don’t,” Bucky said.

“You’re right. That’s you.”

Bucky flipped Sam the bird, but Sam was quite pointedly looking away.
“I’m going to take off, too,” Bruce said. “I need to get some food. I suspect we’ll be down in the lab for a while.”

“Good decision,” Clint said. He’d seen all the scientists get so sidetracked they forgot to eat for almost forty-eight hours. If T’Challa was anywhere near as bad as Tony, Bruce, and Jane—Helen tended to be more practical and eat energy bars and raw vegetables as she worked—his visit might end up being a lot longer than expected. Clint made a mental note to go down there in a few hours to make sure they ingested something other than Twinkies, dried berries, and coffee.

Tony slammed the doors back open and blew in on a cloud of heightened energy.

Clint was on his feet in an instant, scanning for threats. He wasn’t the only one. Guns had appeared in Bucky and Nat’s hands. Steve and Sharon weren’t even looking at Tony; they were both focused on the windows and doors.

“No threat,” Tony said. “Stand down, geez.” He held up his StarkPhone. “I just got a call. The United States has a new President, chosen via emergency election since half the old Cabinet betrayed us. It’s General Spencer. And he wants Darcy as his new Secretary of State when she wakes up.”

Chapter End Notes

So close to the end oh my god, I don't know how to feel about this.

Also: I've said this before but I'll say it again: WanderingWorldWarrior is a fantastic writer and has a fantastic 3 work series on this site starting with one called Of Softer Emotions, great characterization, great writing, great plot, and great Loki. Also some really great smut scenes so if anyone was reading this and hoping for some Loki smut, sorry, that's not really in my writing comfort zone, but go check out their stuff it's wonderful. They just posted the first chapter of the third work and I'm so insanely excited.
Chapter 192

Chapter Notes

prepare for Feels

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Avengers Compound, upstate New York

June 2012

“This is going well.”

Tony didn’t look over. Friday had warned him Steve was approaching. He wasn’t familiarized with living here yet and it kept him on edge. Friday had already intervened to prevent him accidentally shooting another Avenger at least four times, all without specific orders to do so. She was getting smarter.

Steve stopped a few feet away, looking out the massive glass window at the lawn below. The same view Tony was drinking in.

“I keep expecting something to go wrong,” Tony said.

“It hasn’t exactly been perfectly smooth…”

Tony nodded slowly. Steve had a point; there’d certainly been glitches. Jason setting the gas main on fire; Sélin accidentally flooding the bottom three levels of the compound; four lawsuits (all of which Darcy was having a great time fighting); setbacks in the global cleanup effort…

“But we’re all still here,” he said. I’m still here. “We’re still going. It worked.”

Steve didn’t look at him, but Tony watched him closely in his peripheral vision. Tony still wasn’t used to this, either—Steve looking relaxed. At ease.

He wished he could do the same.

“Did you think it wouldn’t?” Steve asked after a second.

Tony considered. “I just can’t shake the feeling that…”

I don’t deserve this. That it won’t last. He hadn’t had a flashback in a while but he still flinched when people slammed doors or sneaked up behind him. He still reflexively chose seats with his back to the wall and found himself locking himself in his lab for hours on end, away from everyone else, when interacting with people became… too much. He still lay awake at night with faces scrolling through his mind, enough of them for him to wish he didn’t have such a good memory, because while he never knew most of their names he could look back on everyone he’d seen die. Everyone he hadn’t been able to save. And he’d lie there wondering if he could’ve saved just one more person if he’d moved faster, turned sharper, aimed better, been better, until it got to be too much and he launched himself out of bed in search of caffeine and a computer. Work. Infomercials. Anything to give his mind something else to chew on.
“That it’s too good to be true?” Steve offered.

Tony half shrugged. That was close enough.

“You still think it should be you going to Berlin with Natasha, Wanda, and me,” Steve said.

That hadn’t been what Tony was thinking about, but now that Steve mentioned it—

“Yes.”

He trusted his teammates, he did, but Tony still could barely bring himself to relinquish the control. To not be there negotiating the new Accords—that was hard. But he had to be here to oversee Stark Industries’ rapidly expanding global influence.

“We need you here.”

“I know,” Tony said more irritably than he’d meant to. “Why do you think I didn’t argue?”

“You argued.”

“Fine. Why do you think I didn’t argue more, then.”

Steve nodded and lapsed back into silence.

“So you and Sharon have been spending a lot of time together,” Tony said. He needed to focus on someone else’s drama. “Anything you want to tell me?”

Steve looked away from the lawn below, and the people on it. Up and out at the sky and the trees. “I don’t know. She’s Peggy’s niece…”

“Yeah, that’s just creepy,” Tony said.

Steve shot him a look. “Thanks for the support.”

Tony smirked. “Always.”

“I like her,” Steve admitted. “As a friend… maybe something else. Eventually. We work well together. But… I don’t think I can ever be… a father. A homemaker. Whatever part of me that would’ve wanted that life, could have lived that life and not gone crazy… it’s gone now.”

“I don’t think she necessarily wants that either,” Tony said. Wondering about what Steve had said, and fairly sure that to some extent it applied to him, too. He highly doubted he’d ever fall in love again.

He gestured down at the lawn. He was better at solutions than emotional comfort, but he could give it a shot. “And it’s not like you have no options if you want to be parent figures to someone under the age of seventeen.”

“I was afraid she’d take off once everything was over,” Steve said quietly.

“I thought the same thing,” Tony said, the words just slipping out. “Only about the rest of you.”

“What?”

Tony kept his eyes trained on Vision down below, Vision and Wanda and the rest. Some sprawled on the grass, some running, some flying, some shooting various weapons. He couldn’t meet Steve’s
eyes as he said it, but Tony knew he owed Steve an honest answer. Even if it hurt to admit.

“No one’s ever stuck around before. For me.”

Tentatively, Steve reached out and rested a hand on Tony’s shoulder. He moved slowly, giving
Tony plenty of advance warning, and Tony tensed but didn’t pull away.

“There are always people like that,” Steve said. “But we aren’t.”

Tony nodded once, jerkily, and Steve dropped his hand.

“So we keep Avenging,” he said.

“There’s a motorcycle gang that’s taken over St. Louis,” Steve said. “I’m headed down there with
Sharon and Bucky for a few days, then we’re going to meet up with the others in Berlin once it’s
taken care of.”

“Have fun,” Tony said, giving Steve a crooked grin.

Steve half smiled. “Definitely.” He hesitated. “Did I ever tell you I’m glad you’re not your father?”

“No explicitly,” Tony said. “Did I ever tell you I’m glad you’re not the man in my dad’s stories?”

“Yes,” Steve said. “Guess neither of us turned out quite like he wanted.”

Tony listened to him go and returned to watching the kids on the lawn.

Wards. That was what enhanced minors been named. Wards of the Avengers. And everyone with a
demonstrable ‘enhancement’ or ‘extrahuman ability’ had been provided the choice to come to the
Avengers’ new compound in upstate New York, an old warehouse and storage facility that Tony
had owned for years and was currently in the process of giving a major overhaul. Beside from the
core team of Avengers and the forty-three kids they’d rescued from the United Nations, another
seventeen minors had gone to Stark Industries personnel around the world, and so far, eleven had
arrived at the compound, along with nine adults who reportedly wanted help mastering their abilities
so they could return to their lives. Tony hadn’t spent much time with any of them yet, but according
to Wanda, none of them seemed very interested in potentially joining the Avengers.

The kids, though—several of them were passionate about making sure that nothing like what they’d
gone through happened to anyone else ever again. Or liked the idea of Avenging. Or were just
ambitious little shits who couldn’t stand the thought of a normal life. Or, in one or two cases, liked
hurting people and saw the Avengers as a way to only hurt people who’d hurt someone else. Tony
didn’t really care. They’d see who could work with the team, and see who was responsible enough
to handle it when they were older, and figure out a way for these kids to master their abilities and
also have childhoods.

Vision shot past the window, followed closely by the four enhanced they’d so far found who could
fly some way or another. They looked like they were playing tag. Tony knew Vision could easily
outmaneuver the kids, but based on the glimpse he got of the android’s face, Vision was enjoying
himself.

Genuine pleasure. Emotion.

And down below, Wanda was showing off her gift, laughing as Zina’s two younger brothers ran
through swirling clouds of leaves and dust suspended in red energy. Zina herself watched closely
with a tentative smile on her face. She was quiet, and slow to trust, but Tony had seen her reading
over his shoulder when he was working on the architectural plans and suspected she was far more intelligent than she let on.

“Mr. Stark?”

Tony spun around.

One of the kids stood across the walkway from him, eyes wide. “Hi—uh, sorry, I’m Peter Parker, I’m one of the, I mean, I um—”

“The spider one,” Tony said. “Radioactive spider, right? OsCorp?” He’d been looking into Norman Osborn for months, and this kid’s experience suggested there was definitely something else going on beneath the surface of one of SI’s major rivals. Well. Previous major rivals. Even OsCorp hadn’t been prepared for upheaval on this scale, and Tony was fairly confident he could muscle Osborn partway out of the game by the time things settled.

“Yes,” the kid said, blushing furiously. “I. Well. I came up with a thing, I mean made a thing, and I was asking Dr. Banner about it, and he said I should talk to you because he’s not an engineer—”

“Inventor, huh?” Tony said, interest officially piqued. He turned away from the window and put his hands in the pockets of his suit coat, walking over to the kid, who looked like he was about to pass out in awe. Tony was used to that reaction by now. Some part of him wanted to preen. Another part wanted the kid to get over it so he could talk without stammering. “Show me what you got.”

Peter pushed up the sleeves of his hoodie, showing two devices strapped to his wrists. “I was thinking, you know, spiders and all, they use webs to get around, right? So I made this stuff, well, technically, I bought some high tensile cable off the Internet from SI and tinkered with it and I think I improved the formula, but anyway, it acts like a spiderweb. Shoots out of these things—”

He gestured, and a slender cable of silvery rope shot out of the right-hand web shooter and slammed into the window.

“Oh no,” Peter said, eyes wide. “I… didn’t mean to—”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “I remember that cabling.” He reached out and flicked it with a finger. Strong. Thinner than he remembered from the specs. And even though he’d only touched it lightly, it was an effort to tug his finger away. “I approved the design last year. You say you modified it?”

“I… yeah, some,” Peter said. “Made it thinner, and more adhesive—”

“Have you considered a patent?” Tony’s mind was already racing with all the implications. Especially if this kid went on to become an Avenger. He knew full well the power of image, and they could do a lot with the spider theme. Especially with literal webs.

The kid blinked. “Pat-patent?”

“Yeah, this is good stuff,” Tony said. “Impressive. Clever. What did you want to ask me about?”

Peter’s eyes were wide. “Um. The… web shooters, that’s what I’ve been calling them, I think the design could be improved but I didn’t have the tools I wanted, and Dr. Banner said experience is good so I should ask…”

“Bruce is in Cuba helping with rebuilding,” Tony said. The Hulk had proven to be immensely useful for moving large quantities of rubble in a very short time period. It had scared the living shit out of multiple armies when Bruce first went green purely to help first responders in Istanbul, but with Loki
around as a failsafe and the enchanted Hulk-containing armor nearing completion at a secret factory in Wisconsin, they’d decided it was an acceptable risk. “Has been for three days.”

Peter blushed again. “I… couldn’t find a time to talk to you.”

*More like were scared I’d bite.* Tony resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “Labs,” he declared. “I need a microscope, these things are brilliant and if you want me to look at them I’m sure as hell not doing it up here. Friday, send Dum-E or one of the others up here to clean that off my window,” he added as Peter disconnected the web from his wrist and it slumped to the floor.

Peter winced. “Uh, yeah, about that, it’s really hard to clean off of glass…”

Tony sighed. “Of course it is.”

“I made a formula, I can show it to you…”

“Please do.”

Peter grinned and started walking.

“Peter,” Tony said.

The kid stopped. “Yeah, Mr. Stark?”

“That’s a dead end,” Tony said, doing his best to keep a poker face. “Lab’s this way.”

“Right,” Peter said, jogging back to him. “I knew that.”

“Oh huh.” Tony started walking and Peter fell in next to him.

The kid worships you, Wanda said to his mind. Tony glanced off the glass-walled walkway at the lawn and saw that she was looking up at him with a grin on her face. It’s fairly adorable.

*Don’t read people’s minds like that,* Tony thought at her.

Wanda waved a hand, and a miniature tornado lifted Zina’s brothers and a few other kids into the air, obviously screaming gleefully they swirled in circles. *I don’t have to. He hasn’t stopped talking about getting to meet you for three days. You should spend more time with them, but him in particular. He’s very intelligent.*

Tony hadn’t let on exactly how impressed he was, but the modifications the kid had made to the cabling were brilliant. He couldn’t wait to find out how it had been done. The patent office wasn’t high on the list of priorities as the US government reordered itself—it had only been three weeks since the Avengers fought Ross to a standstill and captured the people who’d turned on them—but Peter could definitely get a patent on this. Tony would make him the same offer he’d extended to Helen about the cradle—Stark Industries would manufacture it, and Peter would control who got the cable, and how much was sold, and get the majority of the profits. The kid could be rich. Unless he kept it for himself, which Tony wouldn’t blame him for, because there’d been a few stories about the webslinging vigilante of New York in the file on Peter Parker and if the kid wanted to keep going down this path, it’d be smart to not let other people get hold of such a big advantage.

And if this kid looked up to him so much… Tony glanced down at Peter, who was nervously fidgeting with the web shooter on his left wrist and actively looking anywhere but at Tony as they walked down the staircase. Tony was a role model. Weird feeling. He’d told multiple interviewers that no one should ever use him as a role model for their teenage children, and meant it. Because if
he was a role model, that meant he had a responsibility.

He thought about his father. How he never seemed to care about anything except the family name, Tony’s reputation, Tony’s inventions, Tony’s grades, what Tony represented for the future of their company. He remembered playing little league baseball and being the only kid with a father whose father never showed up. He remembered Howard never asking about Tony’s day or seeming to care about his life.

*If I’m a role model for this kid, I can’t be like that.*

Tony stepped up to the elevator, which Friday had waiting for them, and turned to Peter as the doors slid closed. “So tell me,” he said conversationally. Knowing full well the kid would expect him to ask about his powers and how he’d gotten them. “You’re in high school, right? What’s it like? I kind of skipped that phase of childhood.”

Chapter End Notes

I am so, so sorry for the big time gap in between updates. Thank my beta valeks_princess for reminding me that this fic exists. Life is crazy and I have almost no time/energy to write. I promise I’m not giving up!!! We're so close to the end guys! Thanks for sticking around :)
Chapter 193

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_Avengers Compound, Upstate New York_

_June 2012_

Her knuckles were raw and bleeding.

She’d come back from two weeks spent chasing the typical kinds of sadistic assholes who used catastrophes as ways to take advantage of people in the worst possible ways, from Abu Dhabi to Hong Kong to Vancouver to Reykjavik to Bogota, and she was exhausted and still high on adrenaline, still full of the need to cause _damage_.

The two-hundred-pound punching bag leapt with every impact.

_Thud._

_Thud._

_Thudthudthud._

“Are you trying to break yourself?”

Natasha blew hair out of her eyes and looked up. “Trying to get to a point where I can fall asleep.”

Clint let out a breath. He didn’t have to tell her he knew the feeling, and she didn’t have to ask. They’d run into each other plenty of nights on missions and in the training rooms of various SHIELD facilities over the last few years to know each other’s rhythms well. And know that both of them got what it meant to need this sometimes.

“You there yet?”

She shook her head, still breathing hard.

“Mind if I join you?”

“Yes,” she deadpanned. “Go away.”

A faint smile flickered across Clint’s face. He joined her, and they traded off on the same punching bag. Clint would move in, hurl a few blows, and barely be out of the way when Natasha lunged in to take his place, and then vice versa. Back and forth. Working with and around each other, calculating the swings of the punching bag, which hung from the ceiling without a floor tether and swung in wild circles, never once stumbling or tripping the other person up. A ritual of sorts.

_One-two-three-back._

Then Clint.

Then Natasha again.

Until she couldn’t think. Until the pain in her hands turned to numbness and she was too tired to
even lift her arms.

She’d been going at it for an hour before Clint arrived and yet he sat down hard against the wall when she did, just as spent.

Natasha didn’t have to say thank you, either. He understood that too.

“What are you doing next?” she said, the words soft and breathy, escaping on a still-labored exhalation.

Clint didn’t answer for a few minutes. “I told Maria I love her.

“ Took you long enough.”

He elbowed her in the ribs, and Natasha let a small smile curve her lips.

“Gonna settle down?”

“Ha,” Clint said. “No. We... training. The kids. Helping them... adjust.”

“You’ll be good at that,” Natasha said. Clint had always been good with people. Better than she was, for certain. He actually cared about them, for one thing, while she... couldn’t find it in herself to truly care about others in anything more than a vague, abstract way until she knew them. And liked them.

Clint watched her carefully. “You could be good for some of them, too, you know. A... disproportionate number of them have... some kind of trauma. Most of them haven’t talked about it yet. A few have. But I can tell.”

“And I know all about trauma,” Natasha said. Here, in the dark, with Clint and no one else, was the only time she’d let herself sound bitter. Even Zima... she loved him, and he her, yet she couldn’t bring herself to let him see exactly how much it hurt, sometimes, to think about what had been taken from her. Another life. A normal life, or as much of a shot at one as she’d have had living in communist Russia in the early twentieth century, which would have been questionable at best but also would’ve spared her the discomfort of looking back and wondering when she’d become a person who killed and killed and couldn’t even feel guilty for not being guilty at all.

Clint shrugged. “You know about moving past it. About putting your broken pieces back together, not how they were before, maybe, but still something strong.”

He was right. She knew he was right. She knew they’d tried to break her, and succeeded, and that it had taken years of fighting demons both in the world and in her mind to rebuild herself.

“But kids,” she said. “Clint, I’m... over ninety years old. Probably going to live for a lot longer, if no one shoots me in the head.” Longer than you, she thought with no small amount of sorrow. She’d accepted that part of who she was, and knew she’d have Zima and Steve and Vision and Loki and possibly Wanda or Pietro with her, but watching Clint get old and die would hurt. “I’m a killer. Most of them aren’t, and a good number of them never will be.”

“You’d be surprised,” Clint said. “Zina? Sweet girl, but vindictive as hell. That kid Peter is as noble as they come, he’ll never kill anyone if he can help it. I don’t think, but damn if he doesn’t want to do something good in this world. The one who goes by Puck—not his real name, but he won’t answer to anything else—now he reminds me of a mix of Loki and Bucky. Prankster. Asshole. Actually has a good heart buried under all the cynicism. I don’t know if I want to know what he’s been through. There’s a guy who can impose his will on the world around him, which is creepy as shit, a girl who never misses what she aims for with any weapon, a kid who can turn any solid
substance into water—Did you know about a third of them have already started calling themselves
the Young Avengers?”

Natasha blinked. She hadn’t known that. She’d been avoiding them all.

“Maria’s already running and training the paramilitary arm of Stark Industries. It’s growing fast.
Tony’s already got basically a miniature SHIELD working for him,” Clint said. “Working out of the
Tower, mostly, and I’ve been up here.”

“So Maria went from Fury’s right hand to doing basically the same thing for Tony.”

Clint shrugged. “I mean. There was some stuff in between.”

Natasha laughed; she couldn’t help it. Only Clint would call fighting an army of self-modifying
parasitic aliens led by a psychotic monster from space, including in a floating city somewhere else in
the universe, ‘some stuff’.

“How’s Bucky?” Clint asked.

“You won’t ask him?”

Clint gave her a look. “There’s a reason you two get each other, Tasha. You’re both more guarded
than the Kremlin. I like the guy. I think we’re friends. But I’m also not sure he wouldn’t hit me into
next week if I asked him about his feelings.”

“That’s reasonable.”

Clint waited.

“Keep Avenging,” she said after a minute. “I’m an assassin and a spy. And I like what I do with my
skill set now. I’m not about to stop. Steve and Tony, Maria, Sharon, Sam… they can be the
Avengers’ public face.”

“Mm.”

“How’s Prescott?”

Clint laughed. “A hardass. Everyone likes her. Darcy especially. She called us three times since she
woke up last week and every time, at some point, she mentioned how impressed she is with the way
Prescott keeps the new UN in li—oh.”

“Oh what?”

Clint popped to his feet, grinning down at her. “Come on.”

Natasha scowled at him. “I don’t trust that expression.”

“Don’t worry, we’re not putting Nair in Loki’s shampoo,” Clint said. “Right now. Seeing as he lives
in DC. Although I have a bottle that’s been treated that might find its way into the shower next time
he comes up for a few days, but that’s not the point, we have a different guest who I would definitely
not want to prank—”

“Coulson.”

“Bingo.” Clint was jogging through the hallways; Natasha mustered enough energy to match his
pace.
“He’s here?”

“That’s what guest usually means, yeah.”

Natasha scowled at his back.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

He hadn’t turned around.

Natasha let herself be led—dragged, really—into one of four guest suites that had been added to a building slightly separate from the central one.

And stopped short, already mostly hidden behind a mask of her own creation. She wasn’t as guarded as she could be around Coulson, and she’d been expecting him, but these other people were unfamiliar—

“Natasha,” Coulson said with a small smile. “I didn’t know you were back.”

She stepped forward, making sure every movement was lined with lethal grace despite her exhaustion, and eyed the strangers as she responded. “Just got in a few hours ago.”

“I brought her down to say hello,” Clint said with a grin.

“Otherwise you’d just show up through the air vents and case the place?” one of the other women, a young dark-haired one, said sarcastically. “Maybe, I don’t know, slit our throats if something seemed off?”

Natasha sized her up more carefully. This one had bite. “Of course not. Air vents are predictable and throat slitting makes a hell of a mess.”

“That’s the Black Widow, Skye,” the younger man muttered into the woman’s—Skye’s—ear. “You probably shouldn’t antagonize her—”

“You should listen to him,” Natasha said with a smile devoid of humor, keeping her eyes locked on Skye’s.

The man stepped back. Narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously. His accent had thickened when he spoke again. “How did you hear me?”

Natasha smirked. “I read lips.”

He glared.

“No need to pick a fight,” Coulson said; to whom, Natasha wasn’t sure. A faint trace of a smile hovered at the corners of his eyes. “We’re all allies in this room.”

“I don’t know here but the stories say enough,” Skye snapped.

There was an odd dynamic there. Natasha watched Coulson look at Skye, the way Skye met his eyes and glanced away, the rebellious set to her mouth—

It was almost parental.

But Coulson didn’t have kids.
“I’m Jenna,” the third woman said, stepping forward and sticking out her hand with a charming, if uncertain, smile. “Well, Jenna Simmons, everyone just calls me Simmons—that’s my colleague, ah, friend, Fitz—I know who you are, of course—”

“What ‘of course’ is there about it?” Natasha said evenly.

Simmons blinked. “Just that you’re, you know, something of a black ops legend, and of course from the biological side, I’ve seen some of the files on you, heavily censored of course but I would kill to take a sample of your—”

“That’s SHIELD clearance level seven intel,” Natasha said. She looked at Coulson, eyes narrowed. “I thought you said your team all died.”

“I believed they had.” Coulson couldn’t quite keep his genuine, and clearly still painful, relief hidden. It shone through his skin from beneath. “We found them in a Hydra basement. Fury was trying to… break me with their ‘deaths’.”

“He was going to drag us out,” Skye said, crossing her arms. Natasha wasn’t sure exactly why this woman seemed so defensive. “Psychological effects of having us come back from the dead, and then get tortured again in front of Phil—”

“I’m well aware of the nuances of psychological warfare,” Natasha said. “But thanks for the lecture. I’m sure someone will give you a gold star.”

Skye’s eyes narrowed. “Where did you find her?” she asked Coulson.

“You hacked the files even before SHIELD fell, you know perfectly well where she came from,” Coulson said blandly.

Natasha blinked. This—Skye knew her past, what she’d done, where she grew up—

“It was rhetorical,” Skye said, rolling her eyes.

Fitz and Simmons both looked like they were about to faint. Clint was expressionless, but Natasha could feel his amusement, and Coulson—he was somewhere between worried and entertained.

“She’s a charmer,” she said to Coulson. Slowly. Fighting the urge to go on the offensive, to frighten Skye, to protect her secrets—it wasn’t like Natasha’s past was a secret now, anyway. Mostly. She’d voluntarily dumped SHIELD’s intel on the Internet. Including her own data. Pretty much anyone could find it.

But her instincts didn’t listen to that logic, and they were screaming at her.

“She grows on you,” Coulson said with a small grin. “I thought you should know—we’re the official task force for hunting rogue enhanced now. Superhuman threats. We’ll be bringing you people to rehabilitate, or to imprison. As the case may be.”

Natasha looked them over. “You four?”

“A Wakandan woman is supervising us,” Coulson said. “Astur Mahad, their foreign minister. As one of the most functional governments, Wakanda has taken on a number of responsibilities that aren’t directly related to their own domestic and foreign concerns. Darcy seems to have a favorable opinion of Mahad, and thus far it seems she and I will work well together. Steve and Sharon are going I believe Mr. Wilson, the Maximoff twins, and Bruce have expressed interest in joining us at times as well. But the four of us will be the core of the team, yes.”
Natasha nodded slowly. Skye had uncrossed her arms but there was still iron in her eyes; Fitz and Simmons, for all their nervousness, had matching glints of curiosity and determination in their eyes. Those two were a pair, she could see already. Platonic, romantic, some combination of the two, it didn’t matter. Some fundamental part of them was the same. And they were scientists, yeah, but also good people.

“Good to see some of your team made it,” she said, nodding to Coulson. “I look forward to working with you.”

“We have to work with her?” she heard Skye mutter as she turned to leave.

“Other way around,” Natasha called over her shoulder, and left the suite.

Clint followed a second later, clearly biting back laughter. “That went better than expected.”

“Who’s the Skye girl?”

“Hacker. Used to be obnoxiously anti-SHIELD, I don’t know the details but she’s on our side now.” Clint steered Natasha back down the hallway. She’d barely spent any time in this facility and didn’t know her way around well yet, so she let him guide.

Natasha shook her head. “Where does Coulson even find these people…”

“I hope you’re including yourself in that category.”

“Coulson didn’t find me, that was Fury. And you.”

Clint elbowed her. Natasha bumped her shoulder into his hard enough to knock him aside a step.

“Where’s the kitchen in this place?”

Clint shook his head. “You read my mind, that’s where we’re heading. In fact… Friday, are Jane and Helen and Sam and Bucky still in the kitchen?”

“They are, Agent Barton. Would you like me to inform them that you will be joining them?”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” Clint said. He raised his eyebrows at Natasha. “I have Pop Its in my room, let’s grab some and throw them into the room from the ceiling tiles.”

Natasha frowned at him. “Pop Its? You mean the little bags of explosive powder they sell to eight-year-olds on Fourth of July?”

“Duh.”

“Why do you have those?”

“I’m an eight-year-old at heart, and also they are fantastic for making some chaos without actually damaging anything.”

Natasha hid her smile. “You do realize Zima and probably Jane are going to damage things when we throw Pop Its at them.”

“That’s their fault, not mine.”

“Sounds better than trying to sleep.” Natasha glanced down at her still-bloody knuckles, then back up at her friend, no longer able to keep the smile off her face. “Lead the way.”
I'm back, this time in a reasonable span of time! *gasp*

I should really be studying for my psych midterm right now but whatever, that can wait.

Fic recs, for anyone interested, since this is nearing its end (only 2 maybe 3 more chapters, which I cannot believe I just said):

Amateur Theatrics by galaxysoup involves kid Loki and Bruce and Natasha getting bodyswapped and the hilarity of Clint trying to parent an amnesiac child pre-sociopath. It's one of the funniest f***ing things i've ever read. seriously i laughed almost the entire way through this. it's pretty quick and definitely worth a read.

Coulson's Eleven by copperbadge is also hilarious but with a more serious edge. AU in which the Avengers meet because they are all prisoners because someone is being an asshole. (or is he?) Coulson terrifies everyone, jokes are made, readers laugh, and Peter Parker is a significant player, which is always a big Yes Please for me because Peter is fantastic. Also, there is a Loki who works with the rest of the team, and is a sarcastic self-centered asshole in the process, which if you've gotten this far into Cruel Vengeance I'm assuming you are interested in reading.

A Study in Monstrosity. (heads up m/m smut in this one.) Victorian vampire/werewolf Loki x Tony au. Yeah I was skeptical but i swear it's fantastic and has some really, really funny parts. Complete too, which is great! Actually all of these are complete now that I think about it. whatever. this one's great. moving on.

Bend Around the Wind by Scyllaya. absolute monster, complete (thank god) at 403,000 words. I binge read this one a few months ago. also tony x loki (heads up more m/m smut but really well written, in general but also the smut scenes.) fantastic cast of original characters, reminds me of Guardians of the Galaxy except with a higher body count and more smut. Tony gets caught up in a kidnapping and he and Loki are dumped in a torture pit like halfway across the universe and it is a really long ass struggle to get back to Earth. Thanos is a player. The plot is great, the characters are great, and I hate to admit it but this author did a much better job researching than I did and knows the Marvel comics canon like holy shit. Things have clearly been fleshed out a lot more in this story than CV. I am in awe of their writing skills. Please read.

Life in Reverse by Lise. I've recommended this before I think but I'm doing so again because it is so damn good. Slow updates but it's absolutely worth it to just hit 'subscribe' and keep up when new chapters are posted. Loki centric, loki works for SHIELD because of cosmic mindfuckery, funny stuff and lots of good fight scenes and Emotional TraumaTM and Natasha and Loki bonding over their trust issues.

Notice that I was nice and recced 3/4 complete fics so you will not have to suffer at the hands of sadistic writers who leave you with mean cliffies. i figured i've tortured you lot enough, haha.
Wanda took her iced coffee from the barista with a smile. The barista smiled back, already turning away, and then froze halfway between Wanda and the coffee machine.

“Wanda… Maximoff?”

Wanda sighed internally. She’d deliberately put her hair up in a ponytail underneath a baseball cap, and worn plain jeans and a T-shirt, in the hopes that this wouldn’t happen. Again. “Yes…”

“Oh my God,” the girl said, beaming. Wanda was still pissed that this was even happening, but at least it was a positive reaction this time. It tended to be a toss-up between people who loved her and wanted a selfie, and people who hated her and wanted her either dead or in prison. “Oh my God, I can’t believe I’m talking to the Scarlet Witch—”

Wanda smiled reluctantly. “I like caffeine as much as the next person,” she said.

“Who doesn’t?” the girl agreed, and blushed a little. “I—um, can I get a picture with you?”

Sigh. “Of course.”

Wanda accepted the girl’s cell phone and turned around, snapping a quick picture of the two of them. Her own smile looked forced, but the girl’s was huge and incandescent.

“Wanda-ah.”

Wanda handed the phone back to the barista, picked up Vision’s coffee, and handed it to him as he stepped through the exterior wall of the building and appeared right behind her. “Vis, don’t do that in public places,” she said. “We’ve talked about this.”

“There were people…” Vision gestured at the crowd of people on their lunch break who were packing the Starbucks between the door and the pickup counter. All of whom were dead silent with expressions running the gamut from shocked to awed to furious to terrified. “It seemed easier.”

Wanda grinned at him, took his arm, and steered him towards the exit door.

“Have a nice day!” the barista called after them.

“Thanks, you too!” Wanda said with a lot more cheer than she felt, and shoved the door open.

Vision sipped his coffee and studied her anxiously. “I did not intend to make things difficult for you.”

“You didn’t,” Wanda said. “Or… it was already difficult, you phasing through the wall didn’t really make a difference.”

Vision nodded slowly. “I have received word from the new compound. The first group of young enhanced will be joining us in two days.”
“We’re not ready—”

“It will be fine,” Vision said. “The rooms are nearly finished.”

“How many in the first group?”

“Eleven have been deemed stable enough in their powers to attempt a normal life.”

“Eleven,” Wanda said. Imagining it. Eleven kids, teenage or younger. All enhanced. All of them… like her, in some fundamental way.

Vision didn’t smile, but she could tell he took pleasure in her tentative excitement. It was written in the softening of his eyes and spread like a sash of stars across what she could feel of his (incredible, unique, fathomless) mind. Which wasn’t much, because she really tried to stay out of people’s heads unless she had a reason. But she usually maintained a low level of awareness of the people around her, and she gleaned information from it—moods, intentions, a rough idea of where their attention was focused, position in relation to herself. And when Vision was around, it was so easy to let what she could sense of him override every other perception she had. His mind was so different.

With effort, she tore her focus back to the world around her.

“Wanda,” Vision said suddenly. “I have been studying humanity for some time now, and your species quite clearly have a social drive for companionship.”

Wanda looked at him sideways, sipping her iced latte. “Mhm…” She knew Clint or Pietro would say something sarcastic like How groundbreaking or Pretty sure we’ve known that for like a couple hundred years but she couldn’t bring herself to. She could feel his uncertainty, and how hard he was trying.

“And some forms of companionship are different from others.”

“Yes.” Wanda’s heart was beating a little faster than usual. She thought she knew where he was going with this, but couldn’t bring herself to help him out—if she was wrong, it would be catastrophically awkward.

Vision studied his coffee intently. He seemed oblivious to the stares he earned as they walked along the sidewalk. They earned a few glares from a man in the door of a pizza parlor across the street; Wanda glared back and curled a bit of power across his mind, reaching just so for the things that caused this man fear and pain. She got a flash of something involving spiders. It was enough to make him flinch and look away, even though she paid attention long enough to make sure he didn’t connect it with her.

Seemed as though the true extent of her powers had stayed a secret. Good news.

“It occurs to me that I am… human enough to also desire companionship,” he said.

Wanda elbowed him lightly. “Then it’s a good thing you found a group of people so weird that you and your red-and-silver skin and Infinity stone fit right in, isn’t it?”

“A good thing,” Vision agreed. “I am grateful for the Avengers’ acceptance—”

Wanda bit back a smile, unsuccessfully. “It was a joke.”

“Ah,” Vision took a breath. “I am trying to say that… there are other forms of companionship beyond… friendship, that humans want. And that, evidently, I do as well.”
“So something romantic,” Wanda said, losing the battle with her smile. Vision glanced over and looked momentarily stunned. “Is that where you’re headed with this?”

“I… suppose that would not be an inaccurate assessment,” Vision said, tentative hope glimmering across his mind.

Wanda opened her mouth to answer, and then she had a better idea.

Cautiously, she reached out and opened her mind to his.

Vision stopped dead. She turned to face him so they were on the edge of the sidewalk, not blocking people’s paths too much, and barely noticed that their free hands had found one another, fingers twining, because his mind—

Oh, his mind.

It was the first time she’d touched it, really truly let herself fall since Hydra had dragged hapless victims for her to practice on. And Vision was so different. He sensed her presence as more than a nightmare. He matched her. The stunning, soaring architecture of his consciousness pulsed with power and held its nightmares outside of her grasp, and for the first time Wanda knew what it was to be in another’s mind and find only peace instead of fear.

He welcomed her presence. He was order where every other consciousness she’d ever touched had been chaos. Not as structured as a machine, not as strange as normal humans. Entrancing.

So she opened herself to him in return, let him feel her cautious joy, her genuine pleasure and hope.

A question—not even a question, but the essence of a query, passed from him to her, limned with wonder and delight.

Yes, she sent back in a rush of feeling that was acceptance, happiness, purest joy. And hope. Always hope.

For a brighter future.

And then he took a deep (unnecessary) breath and showed her a piece of knowledge that left her reeling.

Wanda felt her shock resonate through her mind in slow motion like food coloring dropped into water, and then it bled back over and the remnants echoed in Vision’s own thoughts.

She didn’t ask if he was sure, because she felt his surety in the knowledge along with everything else. She studied it, his perception, saw her own mind through the sense the mind-stone gave him. The power. The energy rippling through it, warping it beyond what any human mind was ever meant to be, and seeping out into every inch of her body to keep all of her in tune with what her mind had become.

“I’m immortal,” she whispered. To make it true, to make it real.

Vision watched her carefully; she could feel his hesitation.

Wanda processed this information. Still not entirely disengaged from the mental contact.

“Are you angry?” Vision said softly.

“No,” Wanda murmured. “No, I—it’s just… a lot.” She thought of—outlasting them. Darcy, Sam,
Sharon, Tony, Bruce, Jane, Helen, Clint, Maria. They were all her friends, her adopted extended family, and if none of them was killed in action, she would one day see them all die. Even Natasha and Steve and Bucky, with their decelerated aging, would still one day grow gray hairs and wrinkles and eventually their mortality would catch up to them.

And Pietro… Wanda’s thoughts shied away from that idea.

She found herself wanting to talk to Loki.

“‘We’ll figure it out,’” she said, and offered Vision a smile, wobbly but true. “Did you just… just figure this out?”

“I saw it,” Vision said softly. “I’ve never… I cannot simply reach out into another’s mind the way you can, I know not why. Machines, yes, but not humans. You must initiate the contact before I can truly scan the energy the mind-stone gave you and how it is impacting your body.”

Wanda nodded slowly. “…dinner? Tomorrow night?”

“I believe we’ve already exhausted most of what I understand to be typical ‘first date’ topics of conversation,” Vision said. He looked down at their joined hands, still held up between their bodies, and tugged on her fingers almost like he’d never seen other hands before. Leading her down the sidewalk, a faint, humming bond remaining between their minds that Wanda couldn’t bring herself to close. She knew Vision could’ve shut her out, too, but he didn’t. “Questions such as where do you work, and so forth.”

“Well,” Wanda said, unable to completely erase a little smile from her lips. Deciding as she walked that immortality, eternity, wouldn’t be difficult to bear if she had a friend such as Vision at her side. In the biggest irony of her life, Vision more than anyone else reminded her what it was to be human. “We can always laugh about the strange looks the waiters will give us.”

“I shall refrain from walking through walls,” Vision said.

Wanda squeezed his hand and enjoyed the warmth of the sunlight on her face. “Perhaps one wall. As long as I’m on the other side, so I can see everyone’s faces.”
Darcy stared at the clock.

Three weeks, one day, and eighteen hours. That was how long it had been since she’d slept. And she didn’t feel a damn thing.

She still wasn’t used to it, but the increased productivity was immensely satisfying. Darcy was getting twice as much done as she used to, and she’d managed to juggle two separate but parallel responsibilities, one to the Avengers and one to the government. Acting Secretary of State, pending Senate approval once the newly minted President Floren declared the state of emergency resolved, by day, and by night the Avengers’ political manager-slash-PR-consultant-slash-general-strategist. She’d even set up a schedule to call Jane, since her best friend would never remember to talk to her unless Darcy made the effort. Jane and Helen had already dived into Tony’s new lab complex upstate. The last Darcy had heard, there were four hundred other physicists around the world coming to a conference in Boston specifically for some of Jane and Erik’s new findings.

She bit her lip, going back over the email. It was the latest in a long thread between her and Astur Mahad regarding all the various ways they were coordinating things so that Wakanda, the Avengers, and the United States would all emerge from the chaos with a mutually beneficial relationship. Darcy didn’t have a problem with the fact that her loyalties basically went Avengers (and, therefore, Wakanda, since they were now inextricably linked, with T’Challa an unofficial honorary member) first and her country second.

*Secretary Lewis* sounded pretty damn good, but Darcy thought there were other titles she might prefer.

“Darcy, love,” Loki called.

That being one of them.

Darcy shut her laptop decisively and jogged down the hall of their apartment. They’d only moved in a week ago, and she was already in love—it was minimalist, sleek, with windows everywhere and gorgeous views of the city and a hot tub on the balcony. She smirked. They’d already taken advantage of the hot tub. Numerous times.

But Loki was in their bed tonight, not out on the balcony, so she only cast the hot tub a glance full of memories and kept walking.

She pushed into their (!!!) bedroom and immediately began divesting herself of her clothes. Being the youngest Secretary of State in history was fantastic, because she had an undefeatable excuse to dress in expensive, stylish, professional, sexy clothes every day. Today it had been a high-waisted white body con skirt with a dark blue blouse tucked in, a very pretty gold-and-green necklace that she had found oh-so-mysteriously deposited on her dresser when she woke up to an empty bedroom, and black heels on the tall side of classy. Darcy had looked stunning and made sure to spend some time in front of paparazzi. But it was also a relief to kick the heels into a corner and climb into bed.
wearing only her panties and the necklace.

Loki was sprawled out beneath the sheets, smirking at her in the way that said to be very cautious about where she stepped. Darcy checked for magical and physical booby traps, as had become reflex since they started living here. In the gorgeous apartment that had somehow remained unbroken in the chaos of D.C. (She was pretty sure Loki had magicked it back to awesomeness, but didn’t bother to ask.)

“I’m not going to turn into a rabbit again if I climb into bed, am I?” she asked.

“As if I’d pull the same prank twice,” he scoffed.

She grinned and threw herself twice, “You might, since you know I’d expect you to not pull it twice.”

His smirk softened a bit. “You’re clever enough to anticipate such a move, which would make it much more difficult to accomplish.”

“It’s so exhausting living with the God of Mischief.” She scrambled under the sheets and felt around until she could trace her fingers down the back of his thigh, enjoying how his breath hitched slightly at her touch.

“You got itching powder on all my clothes,” he said. “The rabbit was appropriate payback.”

“I had to hop,” Darcy said indignantly.

He nodded, face completely serious, which was usually an excellent hint that he was being not serious at all. “It was very entertaining.”

She heaved a sigh.

“Wanda called me today,” he said, rolling something small and brightly colored around his nimble fingers. It was moving too quickly for her to figure out what exactly it was.

Darcy narrowed her eyes at him. Mind turning over all the angles. She sensed a serious conversation on the horizon. “Did she now.”

“Vision has determined that the mind stone’s gift rendered her immortal.”

Darcy lifted a hand and called her seidr, watching the purple play of it around her fingers. It felt different to her now. More… alive. “The power stone didn’t give me that.”

“It was a brief contact, for you,” Loki murmured, and flipped on his side so she couldn’t reach his leg anymore. She retaliated by shifting closer and letting her fingers splay across his wonderfully cut stomach. “Giving a Midgardian long life would require much more prolonged exposure.”

“Mmm.” Darcy tried not to get too distracted by the feel of Loki’s body under her hand.

His fingers caught at hers, and stilled them. “But it still gave you gifts,” he said.

Darcy met Loki’s eyes. And felt the other gift, the one she was still learning to use, tug at her.

When she made eye contact with people, she didn’t just see their irises. She saw what they wanted. All their desires, first shallow and then, if she concentrated, deeper. Going down until she could see things they sometimes didn’t even know they wanted themselves.
It was hard to master. She hadn’t talked to Wanda about it yet—or anyone but Loki—but Darcy wondered if seeing people’s fears felt like this.

She thought knowing desire was better, anyway. Any fool could terrorize someone with sharp things and spiked hammers, but to know what someone wanted on the basest level was to hold them in the palm of your hand.

“You’ve not tried it on me yet, have you?” he said quietly.

She shook her head. It was a violation of privacy, and they’d come to a mutual agreement to leave one another’s headspaces alone unless invited.

Not that Darcy wasn’t curious. She was. Intensely.

“Look at me,” Loki said, turning to catch her eyes with his. The only light in their room was the city lights shining through the windows; it made his usually green eyes depthless and unfathomable.

She let herself look at Loki.

He was so much more complicated than all the humans she’d tried this on. Much of it fit him well; some of it surprised her; little of it made perfect sense, because people didn’t put their desires into words. Especially the more complicated things. The fundamental wants.

The surface was easy. Sex, and sleep. Both of those things she could read in his body language without weird ass powers gifted to her by an ancient magic rock.

But there was a common thread lacing all of it together. Two, really, intertwined and glowing, inseparable from most of the other things.

“Tell me what I want, love,” he breathed onto her skin.

Darcy let him pull her closer. “Me,” she told him what he already knew. “And a throne.”

She was close enough, now, to see her own wickedness reflected back at herself in his eyes, once she let the gift go. Once she tore herself away from it, really, because it was easier to slip into seeing desires than it was to just see two colorful sight organs when she looked at other people now. It was a constant effort to keep herself above the surface. She supposed she’d get used to that eventually, and the endless wakefulness.

“I’m a prince without a throne,” he said. “Heir to the thrones of two realms, neither of which will accept me.”

“Maybe not now,” Darcy said, mind churning as it had been for weeks. They hadn’t had this conversation yet; the time since Thanos’ second invasion had been an exhilarating disaster and she had no time to spare between babysitting the Avengers’ public image and managing the disaster relief and reorganization of the government. But— “If you go after it, I’m coming with you.”

“You are sure?” he said quietly. “That might not—might not be a journey you return from for a long time.”

“Are you kidding?” she said, thinking about it. “On the one hand, stay here on Earth, watch half my closest friends stay young and pretty while I sprout wrinkles, wondering where you are and when you’ll be able to come back, scrabbling for the top of a pile that used to seem huge but now is really just an anthill, versus come with my unfairly hot boyfriend and see other planets and sail the stars and shit? Is that even a question?”
“If you come with me you will not… the aging concern will remain the same.”

Darcy wasn’t sure how to put this. She’d been stewing over this conversation for ages—she wasn’t stupid, she’d known they’d have to have it at some point—and she still didn’t know how to say what she wanted to. So she just let the words stumble clumsily out, hating that Loki could make her into a person who was clumsy with her words. “Okay, so if immortality were offered to me, I’d take it in a heartbeat,” she said in a rush. “Just gonna throw that one out. No matter where it came from. As long as the strings attached weren’t too thick to cut. I’d take the offer.” She thought of staying on Earth, contenting herself with wrestling human political obstacles that seemed so boring now that she knew what was out there, and tasted bitter in her mouth. “And if you—if you know of a way to make me immortal, if you want me around that long—”

“If I want you around for that long? Darcy, you—” Loki cut himself off, and his voice took on an angry, biting edge when he continued. “You make me mad,” he said. “I cannot—the thought of watching you age while I do not is unbearable, I want you at my side when I conquer Asgard, I want to argue with you and trade insults and hold you at night for the rest of my long life—” She could hear how furious he was that he felt this for anyone, and smirked even as she was flattered that he was willing to open up like this. He so rarely did. And never would for anyone except her and perhaps a few others.

Her chest was filling with painful hope.

“I was going to offer,” Loki said, voice low, rasping, unsteady. “There is… a way to grant an immortal lifespan to a mortal. It would not give you the physical strength of a true Aesir but you would gain their endurance, their resistance to injury and disease.” He hesitated. “It binds the recipient to the giver as… not marriage, not as Midgardians think of it, but a bonded pair. For life. It’s not something to be offered or accepted lightly.”

“And you didn’t want to offer because you were afraid I’d say no,” she finished for him. She knew him well enough by now to predict that.

Loki’s eyes were closed. He was fighting himself. Even now he couldn’t bring himself to drop his mask completely. Darcy could only see it in the set of his lips and the tension around his eyes—see the years of rejections, of people shutting him down, of his supposed friends turning their backs, of his brother and father walking away. And then—

“I’m of Jotunheim,” Loki said, the words sounding forced. But genuine. She lifted a hand to his cheek and he unconsciously leaned into her touch without softening at all, but that was okay. She didn’t want softness. “You heard Thor’s stories—you know what that means, what I am—”

“You realize I saw you, right?” Darcy said. She could’ve offered him sweetness and support but it would’ve been fake and he would know, so she went for her own weird but genuine brand of assholery mixed with comfort. “Blue skin and red eyes and shit. You still looked like you, Loki.” She paused. “Not gonna lie, it was actually kinda hot.”

His eyes popped open at that, looking somewhere between shocked, hopeful, surprised, and intrigued. Darcy felt a slow spreading warmth ignite at the base of her stomach. “We were in a battle and you were noticing that?”

“Like you don’t pause to notice how stunning I am when I’m like, I don’t know, facing off with heads of state,” she said. “Or some shit.”

He inclined his head, a trace of a smirk appearing on his mouth. “I concede the point.”
“Lemme see,” Darcy said, poking him.

“See… my Jotun form?”

“Yessss,” Darcy said, drawing out the word. “You were all like bloody and tired last time—”

“Darcy—”

“Oh come on, I’m not gonna run away.” She paused. “Okay, wait, I’m supposed to be supportive here. If you really don’t want to do it then don’t feel pressured. But also I’m very curious and I promise not to scream. Even a little bit. Read my mind.”

“I don’t need to do that,” he said quietly.

“But it’d help you, yeah?” Darcy knew all about the little quiet voice in the corner of your head always whispering not good enough. Hers hadn’t even been silenced when Steve called to ask in a disturbingly bland voice why someone had called Avengers Tower looking for Darcy Lewis in connection to the death of her father, Ralph Lewis, who had apparently gone insane and spent several months barricaded in a cabin repeatedly cutting himself open “to get the bugs out” before a couple of hunters dragged him to the cops, where he hanged himself in his cell. It had helped. But the little voice was still there. And hers hadn’t been ingrained over the course of centuries. Loki—she knew it would help him to read her mind and know with absolute certainty that she was hiding none of what she felt about the Frost Giant version of him.

It scared the living shit out of her to offer that kind of vulnerability to anyone but she’d trust him with it.

“…it would,” Loki admitted.

“Go on, Lokecicle.”

He frowned at her.

“Icicle, Loki, Lokecicle. No? Too soon?”

“Too pathetic,” he said.

Darcy cackled. “Oh, that one’s sticking. Remind me to text Tony about it in the morning.”

 Loki moved, and in a flash Darcy had been turned on her back with him lined up above her, looming in the dark. The weight of him, the sight of his face inches from hers in the dark, elbows propped on either side of her head and hands pinning her wrists to the mattress, made the heat at her core go from embers into a fire.

“I’ll do no such thing,” he sneered.

“It’s okay, I’ll remember,” she snarked right back, matching his grin.

She felt his magic flare a second before it connected his mind to hers.

Are you ready? he asked. This close, physically and mentally, he couldn’t quite hide his anticipation.

“I was born ready, bitch.”

Loki’s eyes half-closed, and Darcy saw the instant his irises changed from green to red.
His skin temperature, always deliciously cool, dropped to noticeably chilly. Blue seeped sluggishly across his body. The raised lines, what Jane called *epidermal traceries* and Thor had described with a distinct tone of disgust as *barbaric markings* in one recording of a conversation from right before the New Mexico disaster, followed promptly after. Darcy watched them spread down his abdomen and didn’t even try to stop herself from appreciating how excellently they accented his muscles.

“You’re actually hotter than I remember, like this,” she said, because she had to say *something* and it might as well be the first thing that came to mind.

Loki’s eyes reopened all the way. “This may be the first time anyone has ever described a frost giant as ‘hot’.”

“Stick with me and it won’t be the last,” she said, loving the coolness of his skin against hers and imagining lips that same temperature tracing over her own, then down. Wondered if he’d feel cool inside her. She didn’t even try to pretend she wasn’t turned on.

Loki withdrew from her mind slowly.

“So you know I was being honest,” Darcy said, a little breathless. “Can we—”

Loki’s lips closed hungrily over hers and it was just as good as she’d imagined.

Loki

He stared at himself in the mirror.

Red eyes. Blue skin. Same dark hair as he’d always had. Too tall to be a mortal, taller even than the Aesir average, but too small to be a true Jotnar. A runt. A freak. A monster.

But Darcy had looked at this body and not been afraid. Had kissed him, had bedded him with both eyes open. He could barely bring himself to believe it and he’d been reading her mind when he shifted his form. She’d known Loki would need that assurance, and offered to let him see for himself.

He was—not humbled, precisely, by her trust, because humility was a trait he simply wasn’t made for, but if nothing else determined not to abuse it.

Loki remembered the horror he’d once felt at learning his true heritage. Remembered wondering if the darkness and the chaos and the destruction he’d always felt in himself was rooted in being a monster out of bedtime story, if Odin had never been able to truly love him because the Allfather had seen the *evil* in his adopted son.

He still couldn’t meet his eyes in the mirror without flinching the tiniest bit. But as Darcy opened the bathroom door, blinking sleep out of her eyes, and tugged him back toward the bed, Loki decided that eventually—eventually he could learn.

“I will return to Asgard,” he told the darkened room, *promised* the world and the woman at his side. “And take the throne that should rightfully be mine.”

“We,” Darcy said blearily, with the sass he so loved. She flipped over and was awake enough to poke him in the ribcage. “And I think I know some friends who’ll come and help.”
Even half asleep, her smile was wicked.

Loki closed his eyes and savored the savage joy that overtook him. The fierce contentment that came from knowing he had a family, no matter how strange and dysfunctional and riddled with issues it was, to rely on.

_The Realms cannot fathom the chaos to come._

Chapter End Notes

So! This monster fic is officially done!

Thank you all so much for sticking around this long!!! I can't say how much it means to me. The comments, the kudos, and just the steadily climbing hit counts from the silent readers. I appreciate all of it and I'm so grateful that there are other people around who share this obsession/interest of mine.

Update on a sequel: I don't know if there will be one as of yet. Contact me if you want to write a fic based off of this and/or a continuation and/or something to do with one of the characters before they joined this storyline - idk. My tumblr is randomfanficsshit for anyone who doesn't want to use AO3 comments to do so. Or honestly contact me if you want to rant about fandom stuff or whatever. Internet friends are great.

Anyway. Sequel. Maybe? Possibly? My beta and i have kicked around some ideas for one but I have original fiction to write and college is taking up a ton of my time and also there's this Harry Potter fic that was abandoned in 2014 that I'm seriously considering writing an ending for (after contacting the author ofc) because it is so goddamn good I don't think I could handle an ending not existing. I'll post another chapter here to alert anyone who's subscribed to this fic that the sequel is up when/if that ever happens. In the meantime, happy reading, happy writing, happy lifing, thanks for sticking around so long!!!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://archiveofourown.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!